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Even though summer was already over,  
the heated atmosphere at our school did not dissipate.  
Not only that, our second semester was filled with events that riled  
everyone up to the point that it became annoying.  
First was the chorus contest in September.  
In a school that used to have music as a major,  
each and every class here had its own way of motivating itself.

Moreover, Kagurazaka-senpai, Mafuyu and Chiaki were, for some  
reason, competing against each other in the chorus contest,  
with the prize being the right to go on a date (?) with me—  
Our class had, for some reason, engaged itself in intelligence  
warfare against Senpai's class,  
who was last year's winner of the chorus contest,  
and sparks were flying all over the place as a result!



The heat from the chorus contest continued to burn its way into  
October,  
when the sports day was held.

It had been a long-standing tradition for the participants to become injured, one after another, due to the overly demanding events.

There wasn't a single person who could make it all the way to the closing ceremony unscathed.

While the relay between the various school clubs was something that didn't affect the class scores,

our band was somehow engaged in a battle in which our standing in the race would determine the extent of the benefits we would receive.

It ended up with a suspicious conspiracy flying all around us, which heated things up even further!



But it was still too early for the flames to burn out.

The final event was the school festival in November.

Aside from taking up the role as the head chef of our class's goth loli cafe,

I was tasked with composing the songs for our band's performance as well.

The sheer amount of work forced upon me nearly caused me to become breathless from all the pressure.

However, the live performance during the school festival was definitely an important event for our band.

I must not collapse!

Also, I didn't have the luxury of focusing all my attention on the school festival alone.

Why, you ask—





This guy here.

Not only is he a violin prodigy,  
he's also Mafuyu's..... urm..... what's their relationship again?

He too, asked me the same question.

"What is the relationship between Naomi and Mafuyu?"

# Prologue

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By pure chance, I had stumbled upon the words carved into the body of the guitar.

I had handled Mafuyu's Stratocaster once before, but hadn't noticed the words back then. That was because the words were carved on the inside of the body and weren't visible unless the screws were taken out.

# ♪ ♪

"I want to change the tone of my instrument too."

Mafuyu said that during one of our band practices. At that time, we had already finished our first ever live performance, and our summer holidays were coming to an end. I was actively discussing effects units and timbres with Kagurazaka-senpai, but Mafuyu kept prodding me in the back with the neck of her guitar as she listened in on our conversation. I had no idea why she had an unhappy expression on her face.

"..... So you want to modify your guitar? Or do you mean you want to use an effects unit?"

"I do not really understand these things. Just help me modify it, Naomi."

I didn't quite have the guts to modify an antique guitar worth three million yen, but I still removed the back cover to take a look. And that was when I saw *that* located in a square pit behind the pickup.

"Looks like there's something carved into it."

"..... Is that Russian?"

Chiaki asked, as she stuck her face in to take a look. I see, it does look like the Cyrillic alphabet. Just then, Mafuyu snatched the guitar away from my hands.

"Y-You can't look at that."

"Eh? W-What?"

"Cover it up! You do not have to worry about what's inside!"

Why's she so flustered? It's not like I can read the Cyrillic alphabet, yeah?

"Did Mafuyu know about the words inside the guitar?" asked Chiaki.

"I-I did not."

"Senpai should know how to read Russian, right? And should've read a lot of books written by Russians too."

"Russia is the country of revolutions, but if you think that means I know how to read nearly everything..... you're dead wrong!" was Senpai's answer.

Mafuyu snatched the screwdriver away from me, then closed the cover and attempted to put the screws back in place. However, her right fingers were still unable to move much, so she found it difficult to position the screws. I couldn't watch her struggle anymore, so I helped her out with her task.

"What's carved in it?" I tried asking her. Mafuyu took the restored guitar from my hands and hugged it tightly, as though she were trying to stuff the guitar into her body. After some deliberation, she said softly,

"It's a name. The name of the person who gave me this guitar."

The person who gave her her guitar?

"So someone gave you that guitar....." Chiaki touched the neck of the guitar gently.

"That person must've been really generous to have given you such a good guitar."

"He said it's best for someone new to start out with a good instrument right at the very beginning....."

"I thought Comrade Ebisawa learned the guitar by herself. So you actually had someone to teach you..... What's the person like?"

"Eh? Uhh....."

In the end, Mafuyu still hadn't explained things clearly, as she had spoken in bits and pieces. I too thought she had learned the guitar



on her own..... but then again, why did Mafuyu start learning the guitar in the first place? As a professional pianist, who had been surrounded by classical music ever since she was born, something incredible must have happened for her to suddenly pick up the electric guitar.

"Stop asking me questions already!"

Mafuyu stomped hard on my foot all of a sudden. Hey, the one asking you those questions is Senpai!

"Teach me how to use the effects unit. I hope the tone of my playing becomes as colorful as Kyouko's before our next live performance."

"Urm, okay....."

Actually, I really liked the refined sound of Mafuyu's guitar that came straight out of the amplifiers without any modifications by an effects unit..... I don't think there's any need for her to compare herself to Senpai in that area, right? Moreover, we had just finished our first live performance not too long ago.....

"So when's our next live performance? I want to perform again as quickly as possible!"

Please, not Chiaki too!? Senpai hugged Chiaki and Mafuyu by their shoulders, as though she was asking them not to be hasty.

"There aren't many bands that'll invite us to play with them, so our next performance will be during the school festival."

The school festival is going to take place during the latter half of the second semester—in November—meaning, it's about three months away.

"It'll be our first time performing by ourselves, so a three-month preparation period should be adequate."

"I never thought I'd hear that from the same person who suddenly arranged for us to take part in a live performance occurring only three weeks later!" I couldn't help but take a dig at her.

"Have you participated in regatta before, young man?"

Senpai stretched her finger out and pressed it against my forehead. Why the sudden question?

"Nope....."

"Mmm..... In the initial stages of the race, everyone rows their oars using small but quick motions. But that changes once the boat has accelerated to a certain speed; after which, everyone rows using large but slow motions."

"What?"

"It's the same for our band!"

This person's just spouting nice-sounding stuff to trick everyone again. But I had no chance of victory once the thought "Ah, so that's how it is" flashed in my mind. And so..... I could only agree with whatever she said. Damn it!

"We're already at the stage where we're cruising at high speeds."

Senpai grabbed the guitar resting at the other corner of the classroom and carried it on her shoulder. With her back facing us, she continued,

"But it's not good for us to only accelerate. Plenty of troublesome situations may arise before the arrival of the school festival, so what we should be doing now, is getting ourselves used to the feeling of rowing, and move forward in a steadfast manner."

Senpai then turned her head around and propped her index finger up in a cute manner.

"It's not about the speed, but the camaraderie among the four of us."

Chiaki nodded her head immediately, while Mafuyu waited a while before nodding her head silently.

I recalled that very speech much later down the road..... Senpai might have already had some sort of premonition back then, because, in actual fact, a lot of troublesome things *did* happen. The three months that followed were probably the most chaotic of my life, whether we're talking about problems of a personal matter, or things that had to do with the band.

Come to think of it, all those troubles began with—

When the summer holidays came to an end, Tetsurou passed me two tickets.

# Chapter 1 - Chorus Contest of the Queen

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Come to think of it, my father Tetsurou used to give me stuff all the time, though I was rarely ever happy about the things I received. Tetsurou was a music critic, and that strange occupation of his meant he received endless amounts of CDs, books and magazines without needing to buy them—and any excess would always be passed on to me.

It would've been fine if he only gave me "things," but Tetsurou's laziness wasn't something to joke about.

It happened on the last day of the summer holidays. When I arrived home after band practice, Tetsurou flashed a really forced smile and said,

"Nao, I have something to give you. Something good."

"I don't want it!"

"At least ask me what it is!"

"Tell me then! I bet it's nothing good anyway!"

"What a poor attitude. What if it's something Nao really wants?"

"Something I want..... for example?"

"For example..... right, how about a new mother, who's young, beautiful and gentle?"

"That's something only you want."

Speaking of which..... not only was Tetsurou past the age of forty, he had even divorced once. Our neighbors had thought of him as the undergrad forever retaking his finals. It's impossible for someone like you to get remarried, yeah? How about you face the truth? It's about time you do that!

"I do think it's not good to make Nao do all the cooking, washing, cleaning, and etc..... so I've been actively participating in group dates at the hotels to find you a new mother!"



"It would all be solved if you did the housework instead!" All you do is to laze around at home. You don't even write your articles!

"That's mean, Nao. Why are you saying that? I've been working hard all day so I can provide for you."

"Let me ask you this then—what's with you playing the PS2 all day, and your hero being level 30 already?"

"Ah—Well, that's because I'm researching Sugiyama Koichi's music today. After all, he was one of the pioneers who popularized modern music in Japan!"

I immediately turned the PS2 off, and what came after was Tetsurou's shriek and horrified face.

"I just leveled him up this morning! Damn you for switching it off!"

"Get your ass to work!"



I was preparing dinner when Tetsurou walked lazily into the kitchen. He was probably revived by the smell of the miso soup. He said,

"Well then..... back to the topic."

There's no need for us to go back to that topic! God damn it! Why's this person so stubborn!?

"Nao, take these."

The things swaying in front of me while I was cooking were..... some tickets. Just as I was about to brush the tickets aside, I caught a glimpse of the words "Conductor: Ebisawa Chisato." I then realized his motive, and my mood dropped in an instant.

"This is..... your job, right.....?"

"Mmm, yeah. That's why I'm giving them to Nao."

The world famous conductor—Ebisawa Chisato. The person who gave him the rude nickname "Ebichiri" was none other than Tetsurou, who had also been Ebisawa Chisato's classmate in high school and at the College of Music. People frequently gave Tetsurou jobs critiquing Ebichiri's albums or concerts, probably because they thought the two of them had a really good relationship. However, it

seemed Tetsurou wasn't too fond of criticizing his friend's music, so the course of action he took when he encountered such a situation—you might be stunned by what you hear—was push the job onto me. That was also the first time he had asked me to critique a concert.

"No, I can't do it! Do it yourself."

"I don't want to either. I took the job without asking who the conductor was. Please!"

Also..... why two tickets?

"I was thinking of attending the concert with some beauty, so I asked them to give me two. These are VIP seats, you know? They cost forty thousand yen each! Man, how lucky Nao is to be able to go on an extravagant date! So please! It's not nice to leave the VIP seats empty, so make sure you bring someone along with you. I'll fork out the cash for the night at the hotel as well!"

"Oi Tetsurou! Wait!"

But all Tetsurou did was mumble nerdy things like "Metal slime, metal slime" as he escaped back to the world of Dragon Quest.

God damn it! He won't be getting dinner tonight! But despite my anger, I still stuffed the tickets Tetsurou gave me into my pocket.

I couldn't help it, because I kind of liked Ebichiri's performances; and not only would I get to listen to one for free, I'd get some royalties for the article as well. Might as well.



The next day was the school's opening ceremony. I thought it'd be better to get someone to join me for the concert, so I brought the tickets along with me.

When I entered the classroom on the first day of the September of my first year of high school, it felt like my classmates had undergone a complete change. For example, some had become tanned, while others had dyed their hair.

"Why is Nao not tanned at all?"

"Right, didn't you go to the beach for your training camp?"

The guys whose looks didn't change that much came to me and

asked me that.

"The purpose of the training camp was to practice!"

That was the training camp for our Folk Music Research Club..... although we did swim a little.

"Rather than a change in looks, there must be changes in places we can't see."

"That's right. The summer holiday of the first year should be something that brings about a metamorphosis—in many different aspects!"

"And so..... who did Nao metamorphosize with?"

"We're talking about three girls and a guy going on a training camp together. Something must've happened, right?"

The guys in my class were more or less jealous of the fact that I was the only guy among the four members of our club; but I really wished they could've at least tried to understand what had actually happened before seething at me in jealousy..... Not only did I have to do all the cooking and laundry, but a lot of troublesome things occurred as well.

"That's unforgivable! Spit out the truth right now! Did you do it with Ebisawa?" "It should be Ebisawa, right?"

"Well..... Whatever you guys are imagining right now, it didn't happen."

"Move. Stop blocking the way."

A girl's voice suddenly came from behind the crowd, causing the guys to disperse like a flock of frightened birds.

Maroon-colored hair, fair skin, and large blue eyes..... Everything felt rather unreal. Even though it had already been four months since Mafuyu transferred into our school, I still found it rather unbelievable seeing her wear our school's uniform.

"M-Morning....."

I let out a rather unnatural greeting. Mafuyu turned her head to stare at me angrily, then nodded her head slightly and said, with a voice as soft as bubbles, "..... Morning."



"W-Wow, Princess has graced him with a greeting!" "I can't believe this!"

Mafuyu shot a fierce glare at the guys making a ruckus, then sat down in her seat next to me.

"Here. I have roughly memorized them all."

Mafuyu took a few CDs out of her bag. They were The Smashing Pumpkins albums I had lent her yesterday. Since she was the guitarist of our band, she was researching various types of rock bands.

"How were they?" Wait, she took only a single day to memorize them all?

"I do not really like them, but I can use them as a reference."

Our conversation ended with that.

But even so, that could already be considered a huge improvement. Back when she had just transferred here, Mafuyu acted just like an injured cat afraid of coming out of the hole it was hiding in. After spring ended, we spent the summer together, and conquered our very first live performance—it took all that to shorten the distance between us by just a little.

But superficially, it might've only seemed like she was finally willing to greet me in the morning. The guys looking from afar were actively involved in discussion. "So how far have those two gone?" "Since they're exchanging morning greetings, they should be bidding each other good night as well....." Shut up, you guys are irritating!

And next..... I checked to see if the tickets were still in my pocket.

I didn't think it would work, but I tried asking anyway.

"Oh right. Mafuyu, what are your favorite pieces out of all the symphonies by Dvořák?"

The classmates around us knitted their eyebrows. Can't blame them..... it's not like you'd expect to hear a question like that in a high school classroom in the morning.

"Why are you asking that?" Mafuyu tilted her head and asked.

"Well..... urm, just think of it as a survey."

"The third and the fifth."

The waters were deep, but there seemed to be hope for me.

"How about Tchaikovsky?"

"Manfred Symphony."

"You two are indeed father and daughter. Even your tastes are alike."

"What are you talking about?"

I gently took out the tickets and placed them in front of Mafuyu. The pieces to be performed were Tchaikovsky's [1812 Overture](#) and [Manfred Symphony](#), and Dvořák's [Symphony No. 5](#)—and Ebichiri would be conducting. Mafuyu's expression froze when she saw that.

"..... What are you thinking?"

"Urm..... Tetsurou gave me these, and..... there's two of them, so I'm trying to get someone to go with me."

"That feels so stupid. Why would I want to watch Papa's concert?"

Mafuyu turned her head towards the blackboard after saying that. She really disliked her father a lot, so I knew inviting her would turn out futile.

"He failed~" "He's been dumped~" "So there's really nothing going on between them!" "Nao, you've sure got guts asking her out on a date in class." These live commentators are really irritating!

"So that means Nao's partner is indeed Aihara?"

"Yeah, it's got to be Aihara. She's practically no different from your wife!"

"Who's talking about me?"

The door located behind us suddenly opened, and a voice flowed in. The classmates around me jumped in shock.

"Morning! Hey Nao, listen. I forgot today was the start of the second semester! We came to school at a later time during the summer holidays, so I ended up sleeping till nine today. Why didn't you wake me up!?"

Chiaki walked past me and Mafuyu, then sat down in the seat in

front of me. As expected of the ex-Judo Club member, Chiaki had casually tied her short hair to the side using a rubber band. Her bag was stuffed with her drumsticks and some old magazines strengthened with sealing tape—she was probably practicing her drumming in an empty space on the rooftop or something.

"Oh? What's this?" The sharp-eyed Chiaki saw the tickets on my desk.

"A concert. Do you want to go? But it's a classical concert....."

"Will those around us forgive me if I sleep and talk in my dreams?"

Then don't sleep!

"Ah, so the conductor's Mafuyu's father? This is live, right? Will they be performing things like Ebichiri's cheers or Ebichiri's dance?"

I couldn't help but sigh. I really don't know what'll happen if I bring Chiaki with me.....



Because it was the day of the opening ceremony, we had a long homeroom in the afternoon. Our class's female prime minister, Class-rep Terada, walked up to the stand with brisk steps, then jumped straight to the issue.

"Next, we'll be discussing the topic for today."

Terada pushed her glasses up, and the male class representative (a.k.a. Terada's slave) began distributing the handouts.

"There'll be a chorus contest at the end of the month, so we have to decide on a conductor, the accompaniment and the rest of the staff."

Come to think of it, I do recall something like that. Music used to be offered as a major at our school, so it was tradition to hold an inter-class chorus contest every year. It was a pretty grand event too. At any ordinary school, the event would probably be held in a sports hall or something; but at our school, the chorus contest was held in a large music hall that could accommodate all the students and teachers.

I briefly glanced at the information about the chorus contest printed



on the handout. The set piece was Mozart's <Ave verum corpus>. Pretty good choice. It's short and easy to memorize.



"Since we've already decided Nao will be the conductor, all we need to do now is decide on who's going to be the accompaniment."

"She's right....." "Nao's the only who can do it!"

"Oi, hold on a second!"

When I raised my head, I realized everyone in the class was already looking at me.

"You're not willing to do it, Nao?" Terada spoke to me in an overbearing tone, as if she were the people's representative. "Isn't your father a music critic?"

"The two aren't related at all! Decide it in a more democratic manner!"

"Fine. Nao, please name three of your favorite conductors," said Terada.

"Why?"

"It's part of the democratic process."

What's with that? I didn't get it, but no one in the class dared oppose Terada.

"Hmm..... Eugene Ormandy, George Szell and Charles Munch."

"Well then—" Terada placed her hands on the stand and scanned the class once. "If anyone besides Nao can name two or more conductors, please raise your hand now."

A silence fell upon the class, as though it were twelve thousand years after a nuclear fallout disaster. Forget raising their hands—no one moved a single inch.

"—Then it's decided. Nao will be conducting."

I was rendered speechless by Terada's cruel declaration; it felt like I could hear the sounds of democracy crumbling down around me.

"So next, the candidate for the accompaniment."

As soon as she finished saying that, everyone in the class carefully turned their head around to look at the seat beside me. I was originally confused as to what was happening, but I soon caught on.

If we're considering who in our class knows how to play the piano, the very first person that comes to mind can only be..... Mafuyu. Because she had won the international piano competition held in Eastern Europe at the mere age of twelve—the youngest ever girl piano prodigy.

However, she no longer wished to play the piano because of a certain condition, a condition everyone there—and not just me—knew very well. The root of the cause was probably psychological, but the middle, ring, and pinky finger on Mafuyu's right hand couldn't move normally.

But Ebichiri did say before, that Mafuyu's condition had greatly improved since she met me; and I had even seen Mafuyu play the piano in secret during our training camp.

Then again..... the problems of her heart were much more serious than her physical problem. It happened at a concert in England—Mafuyu was just about to play the first note of Chopin's sonata, but her fingers became unable to move. She hasn't yet fully recovered from the damage caused by that incident, so even if this is just a school competition, she probably won't be able to play the piano on stage.....

That was why no one dared suggest that Mafuyu play the piano.

All everyone did was quietly peek at Mafuyu's expressionless face. In the end, no one nominated a candidate for the accompaniment.



"Oh? So you're the conductor for the Third Class of First Year?"

For some reason, Kagurazaka-senpai smiled really happily when she said that. She was actually the first of us to reach the practice room—which meant she had probably attended her classes in the morning. I mean, she was one of those bad students that typically skipped class all day, and that only came to school after school was over.

"Senpai's from the Second Class of Second Year, right? Has your class already chosen a conductor?"

"Mmm, I was made the conductor right away—it was the same last year. I'm already itching for the fight."

"Senpai's not singing? Why?" asked Chiaki.

I was curious as well. Senpai's the lead singer for our band, so wouldn't it be better if she was singing rather than conducting?

"The pleasure you feel when the audience behind you applauds for you is quite a unique experience! The only occupation in this world that allows you to experience that is the conductor. I remember..... Ebisawa Chisato said something like that in one of his interviews."

"That's because he is a narcissist."

Mafuyu mumbled, as she wiped her guitar with a piece of cloth. From the tone of her voice, it sounded like Mafuyu was just irritated with her father, rather than trying to hate on him.

"I feel like I can get along really well with your father. Can we invite him to watch the chorus contest? He should be more than willing to come if there's no conflict with his schedule, right?"

"Definitely not!"

Mafuyu rejected Senpai's suggestion with a frightening expression on her face.

"Ah, speaking of which....." Our talk about Ebichiri reminded me of the matter of the concert, so I pulled the tickets out. "Are you interested in attending this, Senpai? Though it's a complimentary invitation ticket....."

The smile on Senpai's face disappeared as she grabbed the ticket from me. What's wrong? Is she busy the day of the concert? Or are the pieces too heavy for her tastes? Dvořák's <Symphony no. 5> isn't really a problem, but <Manfred> may not be for everyone.....

"There are two tickets..... meaning you're coming along as well?"

"Eh? Ah, yeah, because Tetsurou pushed his job onto me yet again. Urm, well..... you don't have to force yourself if you don't want to go."

"No. I'll definitely make myself free that day! I can treat this as an invitation for a date, right?"

"Eh?" Huh? What?

"It hasn't even been a month since that passionate night—I never would've expected young man to take the initiative to invite me. I'm dying to turn my happiness into endless words to whisper into your ears, but since others are around right now, let's leave that for that night."

Please, don't go around saying such things, or those that are unaware of what's going on will misunderstand! What do you mean by passionate night.....

"..... For that night?"

"Because the concert's in Tokyo, right? The performance will probably end at around eight in the evening, and Ebichiri will most likely answer the audience's call for an encore. And after the concert, we need to eat dinner; so rather than going back home after all that, it'd be better if we stayed the night."

"You can't!" Mafuyu stood up all of a sudden.

"Geez—Senpai! What are you going on about!"

Chiaki stood up as well. I took a step back on reflex.

"I do quite enjoy seeing the cute jealousies of you two!"

Senpai hugged Chiaki, who was walking towards her, and planted a kiss on her forehead.

"Don't think I'll forgive Senpai just like this!" Chiaki was still furious despite being hugged in Senpai's arms. I was already used to seeing scenes like these, so I wasn't too surprised. Senpai really enjoyed flirting around with girls, and Chiaki joined this band because of Senpai. She had a reason to be mad, even if Senpai had only said that as a joke. But..... urm, why is Mafuyu angry as well? She's even glancing at me angrily.....

"Are you jealous of me, Comrade Ebisawa? Or perhaps..... you want to come along as well?"

Senpai hugged Mafuyu from behind, then dangled the ticket right in front of Mafuyu. Mafuyu quickly turned her head away as her face

turned red.

"Then..... I'll be attending the concert together with young man, alright?"

"..... You can't."

"You heard what she said, young man."

Senpai threw the ticket back at me. It seemed like Senpai was happy about the strange turn of events.

"The ticket's yours, so you should be the one to decide whom to give it to. However..... it seems Comrade Ebisawa and Comrade Aihara are both unwilling to go?"

"Kyouko, that's just too sly of you."

Mafuyu protested, as she continued to struggle in Senpai's arms. Mafuyu was the only person in the entire school that addressed Senpai by her name, and because they always hugged each other like that, misunderstandings about the Folk Music Research Club grew deeper and deeper.

I then suddenly thought of something..... If I give the ticket to Mafuyu and use the concert as an excuse to try to convince her once more, it might turn out to be a good opportunity for her to get back on good terms with her father?

But..... with the way things are right now, it'd be a little strange for me to give the ticket to Mafuyu.....

"How about this? The ticket will go to the victor of some contest we'll all be participating in."

A beastly smile emerged from the corners of Senpai's mouth.

"If that's the case, then Senpai will definitely win!"

Chiaki complained. I felt the same way she did. Senpai loved things like gambling and contests, and because of her ingenious schemes, she had never once lost before.

"I can handicap myself! Comrade Ebisawa and Comrade Aihara can team up together; and I'll be alone by myself. I also grant permission for young man to be on the same side as you two. One against three. How about that?"



It's a little strange for the terms to be that good, right? Senpai must be very confident of herself to offer a condition like that. Just as I was about to say something, Mafuyu suddenly raised her head and said,

"Fine."

"I'm really happy, Comrade Ebisawa."

Senpai kissed Mafuyu lightly on the forehead. Mafuyu's face turned red in an instant, and she quickly pushed Senpai's lips away.

"If Mafuyu agrees, then I'm in as well!"

Urm, you two, calm down! Don't accept the contest without even knowing what you'll be competing in!

"So what are we competing in?"

"How about..... a sauna endurance contest where we can touch each other?"

"You just want to touch the two girls!"

"Young man can join in as well, yeah?"

"I see, I can make sure you're not touching them..... No wait, that's not the problem! I'm a guy here!"

This person could definitely arrange for a unisex sauna, so that was a really scary suggestion.

"If you're against the sauna, then how about an eating contest where we can touch each other?"

"What's the reason behind touching other people in an eating contest? And stop being preoccupied with trying to touch others!"

"Then..... if we're talking about four people, then Mahjong would be a good choice."

"I do not know the rules of Mahjong," Mafuyu admitted immediately.

"It's simple. The one with the least points has to strip."

"Don't teach her the wrong things!"

"So your rule is that the winner has to strip? I don't really mind if you're that desperate about stripping."

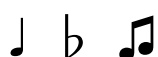
"I am not stripping! And please don't forget the original purpose of the contest!"

After coming up with a huge list of indecent suggestions, Senpai finally said, in a serious manner,

"How about this then. Since we have four musicians here fighting it out, let's decide the winner with music!"

Senpai looked at my, Chiaki's and Mafuyu's faces..... In retrospect, all those crazy antics were probably part of Senpai's plan to force us to grudgingly accept her suggestion.

"The winner shall be decided through the chorus contest!"



Rumors of the contest had already spread throughout the whole class by the very next day.

"I heard you guys will be competing against Kagurazaka-senpai, and that Nao has to strip if he loses?"

"What's the point of you stripping? The one stripping should obviously be Aihara or Ebisawa!"

It seems they've received some strange information..... As for Terada, she was looking at me with tears in her eyes, saying,

"I'm really happy to see Nao so motivated about conducting!"

No, you're wrong. I'm not the least bit motivated.

The rules of the contest were very simple. Senpai's class would be competing against our class, and the winner would be the class with the higher score. There was a total of twenty four classes in our school, but even though they only announced the results of the top five classes..... "It's impossible for both our classes to miss the rankings, because my class will definitely get in the top five"—that was what Senpai had confidently said.

"Meaning Kagurazaka-senpai will be stripping if we win?" One of the idiotic guys said that and stirred up those around him.

"Everyone, lend me your strength!"

All the guys raised their fists in the air in response to Chiaki's cry.

Please! What are you guys so excited about? However, I was the most surprised when Mafuyu said, "I am willing to be the accompaniment during our practices".

"Princess..... is that really okay?"

Terada was on the stand when she asked that question worriedly. "Princess" was a nickname Terada had come up with for Mafuyu, after much difficulty, and now, the rest of the girls in the class were also addressing Mafuyu by that. It might've seemed like they were doing it out of respect for Mafuyu, but in reality, it was their way of teasing her.

"It's okay. I cannot sing well anyway."

Mafuyu glanced at me as she said that.

"It should be fine if it is only during the practices. I can do it if Naomi composes the accompaniment."

I nodded my head without even thinking. Mafuyu actually said she wanted to play the piano..... Is she that desperate to win?

It should be easy composing a piano accompaniment for the set piece; and Mafuyu should be able to play it, despite the limited number of mobile fingers she has, if I omit a few notes. She's still way better than those without any prior piano experience anyway.

"Let's go with that. We'll come up with the rest of the plan after we've selected our choice piece."

Mafuyu agreed with Chiaki's suggestion.



After school that day, we sent two guys over to Kagurazaka-senpai's class to gather information on what our enemies had chosen for their choice piece, but..... only one of them had come back.

"In order to let me escape, he..... ugh....."

The survivor gagged and said no more. What's with the exaggerated acting!

"But..... it should be fine! He's a really loyal guy, so he'd never reveal his class no matter what sort of torture they'd put him

through!"

"They'll figure it out from his badge....."

"Ahh, I see. We're done for!"

Our spy broke out into a frenzy after that tsukkomi of mine. Are you retarded!? Even without the badge, there's probably someone who recognizes his face!

"So did you two find out what their choice piece is?" Terada asked.

"Nope. We were arguing about the girls' uniform. That guy rejected my notion of cheerleader outfits, so I couldn't help but protest. And we were caught like that."

"You guys are absolutely useless."

"You two don't have to come back!"

After hearing about their stupid actions, my drive—which was already low to start with—sunk even lower.

The recording of last year's chorus contest dealt the critical blow. The winner was the First Class of First Year—in other words, it was Kagurazaka-senpai's class.

The person wearing a formal tuxedo with her hair coiled up, was none other than Kagurazaka-senpai. Their choice piece was Niimi Tokuhide's ensemble piece [<Kikoeru>](#). The different tempos of the song were clearly distinguishable, and were coupled with a meticulous ensemble. We were enchanted by it, despite us watching the video while sitting on the hard and uncomfortable chairs of the classroom.<sup>[1]</sup>

"It's no wonder they got first....."

"It's said they were the first ever first years to win the contest."

My classmates discussed quietly in the dark. Looks like we have no chance at victory. Well, I had been okay with Senpai winning since the very beginning anyway.

In order to handicap herself, Senpai had suggested a one-versus-three battle. It may have seemed like we had three times the advantage over her, but because the contest was a fight between the classes, we didn't manage to gain an actual advantage from that. Her admirable use of sophistry hadn't changed, and had placed

her in a favorable position on the battlefield.

I let out a weak sigh. At the same time, I could feel a gaze piercing through my cheeks—Mafuyu was staring intently at me from the seat beside me.

"U-Urm..... What?"

From the moment the video ended, till the lights were switched back on in the classroom, Mafuyu stared at me.

"Do you really think we can't win?"

Mafuyu finally spoke, as our classmates began to leave the audiovisual room.

"But..... you did see the video just now, right?"

"That performance..... looked more impressive than it actually was."



"What Comrade Ebisawa said is right~"

That was what Kagurazaka-senpai said during band practice that day.

"There are a few techniques that'll help increase the chances of winning the chorus contest. For example, you can deliberately emphasize the strength of the voices, choose a polyphonic piece, wave the baton in exaggeration..... and so on."

"I see....."

"Also, all the judges are inexperienced at music!" Chiaki added. So that's why Mafuyu said it looked more impressive than it actually was? Because it was a performance to bluff the laymen?

"Wrong."

Mafuyu shook her head as she continued to tune her instrument.

"It was a performance to bluff 'the laymen who were forced to become judges, but who were unwilling to show their lack of expertise.'"

..... I see. Any amateur of the profession would be able to discern whether the performance was good or bad; however, the judges



tried finding "reasons" to decide whether they should award high or low marks for the performance. And that's what our cunning Senpai aimed for with her tactics.

"I would've adopted a different strategy if the judging criteria had been based on polls of the student population. But since there were only four judges, it was much better to choose a piece that catered to their tastes."

"That reminds me—considering Senpai's class, your choice piece was really conservative."

I thought they would've chosen a rock piece as their choice piece, but the piece they selected sounded way more like the performance of an ensemble. It was kind of disappointing.

"One of the judges last year was the social studies teacher, who was a strong advocate of freedom."

I sighed. Senpai had actually considered even the tiniest details..... The song they sang, <Kikoeru>, was composed during the Gulf War; it was a song that advocated peace and the conservation of nature. It must've struck a chord with the social studies teacher.

"So..... what will your class be singing this year?" asked Chiaki.

"We've decided to do a rock piece."

"Eh? Which song?"

"It's a secret. My assisting the enemies ends right here."

Senpai grabbed her guitar and stood up.

"Let's begin our practice! We can't just focus on the chorus contest alone—the school festival is approaching as well."



Senpai was the only one—out of the four members of the Folk Music Research Club—that cycled to school. That meant we could make use of our time walking to the train station after practice to discuss our battle plans.

"When's the latest we can decide on our choice piece? This weekend? Then we'll have to think harder~"

Chiaki swung her bag around as she walked down the middle of the shopping street. Her eyes were burning with a passion that only members of the sports clubs possessed, and that made me feel all worn out.

"Who are the judges this year?"

Mafuyu asked, from the other side of me.

"The principal and Miss Maki are fixed judges each year. Who else is there....."

Miss Maki was the music teacher, and also the supervisor of the Folk Music Research Club. That was why Chiaki asked, "That means we can bribe Miss Maki, right?"

"Problem is, Kyouko would be a step ahead of us if it could be done," replied Mafuyu. They ignored my presence as I walked in-between the two of them, and continued exchanging opinions enthusiastically.

"Nao!"

Someone stomped my foot all of a sudden, nearly causing me to fall.

"You're always daydreaming! Can you please be more enthusiastic about this!? Is it okay for you to lose to Senpai?"

Chiaki moved her face close to mine. We were standing in the middle of a crowded street right in front of the station, and the stares of the passersby felt really uncomfortable.

"But I don't think we can win."

"So you want to go to the concert with Kyouko?"

Mafuyu moved in front of me and questioned me with a stinging glare in her eyes.

"No, it's not that I particularly want to....."

"Be clear about it!"

"Why's Mafuyu so concerned about all this? I can understand why Chiaki's angry, but....."

"Oh? So you know why I'm angry?"

Chiaki asked, in a really belittling tone. I nodded my head without

confidence. It's because Chiaki likes Senpai, and having heard Senpai say she wants to go on a date with me—Chiaki wouldn't feel that great, even if Senpai had meant it as a joke, right? Chiaki knitted her forehead and sighed when she heard my explanation.

"Mafuyu, our enemy probably isn't Senpai, but the denseness of this idiot."

"I feel the same as well."

Mafuyu agreed without hesitation. For an instant, she looked at me as though she had something to say. However, she turned her head away immediately after, and walked quickly towards the station. Chiaki made a face at me before catching up with Mafuyu.

I remained rooted to the ground for quite a while, due to my confusion. When I finally realized I had to chase them, I ran down the stairs, but the doors to the train had already closed.

Exhausted, I sat on a bench on the platform. A voice suddenly came from behind me.

"Looks like it'll be an easy victory for me."

I nearly fell off the bench. I turned my head around and saw Kagurazaka-senpai standing behind me with a crafty smile on her face.

"..... Why are you here?"

Didn't she cycle back home on her bicycle already!?

"I was planning to gather information on your battle plans, but it seems like it was an unnecessary move."

Senpai sighed and sat down next to me.

"In any case, Senpai had already won the moment you suggested the idea of a contest, right? The one-versus-three handicap is pointless. We have no chance of winning!"

Right after I finished saying that, Senpai stared at me with a slightly shocked expression on her face.

"Young man, it seems like you have some misunderstandings about me~"

"What did I misunderstand?"

"You should know very well that I only fight battles I will win. But the other mantra of mine is..... I will never fight a battle that can't even be considered one."

Senpai placed her hand on my thigh.

"I joined this battle because I believed that young man, Comrade Ebisawa and Comrade Aihara, are worthy of being my opponents. This contest is not pointless, and I do not want an empty victory either."

The announcement of the incoming train was broadcasted throughout the station. Senpai gently moved her body away and stood up.

"However..... the current you is unable to compete against me. Forget about one versus three—the three of you added together isn't even on par with just half of me. What a shame."

I listened blankly to the sound of the incoming train, as well as Senpai's footsteps, as she climbed up the stairs, disappearing from my sight. However, I was unable to pry myself from the bench for a long time.

She believes we're worthy opponents.

But the current me is—



The next day, it was our class's turn to use the music room after school. Since we hadn't yet chosen our choice piece, we started by practicing the set piece.

K618 <Ave verum corpus> was one of Mozart's masterpieces. It was a simple song that was easy for the different parts to practice on their own. But the task of gathering the separate soprano, alto, tenor, and bass lines, and blending them together to form a single song, wasn't so simple. It was already difficult enough for a layman like me to grasp the techniques of harmony; but add on the fact that the thirty-plus voices before me were all singing on their own..... Holding the baton in my hand, I was beginning to feel lost about what I needed to do.

"Nao!"

Chiaki, who was standing in the front row with the other altos, had her eyebrows arched upwards.

"Hey! If all conducting is just standing there and swinging your hands left and right like a metronome, then I know how to conduct too!"

"The only thing about you that's worth mentioning is your knowledge of music! So please do better than that!"

"That's right, you won't be able to become your father's successor like this!"

Oi! Don't lump me together with him! I placed the baton on the music stand. I was rather pissed off. Hey, I'd be really troubled if you blamed the disharmony on me as well!

An awkward silence filled the music room for a short while; and the person who eventually broke the silence was Chiaki.

"How about this—we'll head outside."

Eh? W-What? Our classmates started stirring up quite a commotion after hearing Chiaki's words, but Chiaki turned to face the piano and continued,

"Mafuyu, please teach that idiot properly. We'll move into the corridor to practice in our own sections."

There were some who objected, saying they didn't want to leave the air-conditioned comfort of the music room, but Class-rep Terada agreed to Chiaki's suggestion. So my classmates began walking out of the room and into the corridor, leaving behind a surprised me, and Mafuyu, who was still sitting at the piano.

What the heck is going on here? Just what is Chiaki planning?

I tried my hardest not to make eye contact with Mafuyu, and sat down in front of the music stand.

I could hear my classmates singing on the other side of the heavy metal door of the music room. But it wasn't just us—all the other classes were practicing as well. The voices of hundreds of people were all mixed together, resulting in a muddled and unclear sound.

"..... Do you still want to be the conductor?"

Mafuyu asked me softly.



"I'm not against it....."

It was just that everyone seemed to have some sort of weird expectation of me—it was the same yesterday, with Kagurazaka-senpai as well. I hate it. They think we can beat last year's winners just because I critique music? A conductor is not a magician!

"I can understand your feelings....."

My view of Mafuyu was blocked by the cover of the piano, so I couldn't see what expression Mafuyu was wearing when she mumbled those words.

"I feel..... that a conductor is unnecessary for an ensemble made up of laymen."

"..... Mmm, you're right."

"Why?"

"Well, no one has any concentration to spare to pay attention to my baton, as their hands are already full trying to focus on the scores in front of them. So they depend on the piano accompaniment to guide them, but even the accompaniment isn't—"

I stopped my sentence halfway.

Everything I had said until then was correct. Those without a background in music wouldn't be able to follow the conductor while singing, and an inexperienced accompaniment player would just play the piano at his own pace; so there would be absolutely no need for a conductor. However—

I stepped onto the conductor's stand once more, and made eye contact with Mafuyu. It was as though her eyes were asking me "Why did you think I volunteered to be the accompaniment?"

That's right. Our accompaniment wasn't chosen just because she "happened to have learned piano before," which seemed to be the rationale for choosing the accompaniment in nearly all the other classes.

The accompaniment was none other than Mafuyu.

There was Mafuyu and me—a weapon Kagurazaka-senpai's class did not possess.

I gently lifted the baton off the music stand. Mafuyu's shoulders

delicately responded to my action.

I waved the first note slowly, as though I were trying to thread a needle in the air. The song was only forty-six bars long, but each and every bar and beat remained lithe, despite the solemn mood of the tune—

The melody of the piano began making its way forward. I was in total control of the tempo, and it almost felt like I could scoop each individual note up with my hand..... Since the tune was something I had composed specifically for Mafuyu, it was made up of only the most basic triad. The delicate sounds would perfectly coordinate themselves to the slightest movement of my fingertips. I even thought I could feel Mafuyu's breaths. The song began to play in my ears—the main melody shifted keys to A Major, turning the mood of the tune slightly darker; then, to F Major.

The crystal clear voices of the prayers echoed off the tall ceiling of the cathedral, and became absorbed by the baton in my hand, that pointed at a faraway place. The area around us finally returned to silence.

When the piece was over, I stared at the blackboard at the back of the music room for a long while. I could feel my strength flowing out of my body.

I slowly stepped down from the stand, and made my way towards the piano. Mafuyu's face was dyed a faint red. She shifted her gaze away when she realized I was looking at her.

"I'm sorry, Mafuyu..... and thank you."

"All I did..... was to play to your conducting."

I focused my attention on Mafuyu's right hand, which rested on the keys of the piano..... the hand of hers that was different from everyone else's.

Mafuyu used that hand for my sake—

"Ah! I did not do it for you!"

"Ah..... no, you obviously didn't do it for me, so..... why? Because you want that ticket?"

"No! Y-You and Kyouko....."

Me and Kagurazaka-senpai? Is there something wrong with us attending the concert together? But Mafuyu's face turned red halfway through her sentence, and she didn't say anything else for a while.

"Geez! You idiot!"

In the end, she said only that, and began to repeatedly slap my arms vigorously. Just as I was about to grab her wrist to stop her, Mafuyu slapped my hand away with her face flushed red. Mafuyu was looking past me, in the direction my back was facing—

I turned around in shock. The door of the music room had opened, unknown to us, and created a tiny slit, and all our classmates were peeking at us through that sliver.

"Darn! It's over already?"

"The squabble between you two was really short!"

"That was so boring!"

It's not like we exist for your viewing pleasure!

Chiaki gave me a hard stomp on my ass. By the time we resumed practice, there wasn't much time left for our class to use the music room, but the practice that day made me feel as though I had finally managed to catch hold of the edge of Kagurazaka-senpai's tuxedo.

After practice was over, Mafuyu and I found ourselves alone again, headed to the music library to return the baton and the scores.

"Mafuyu, can you play the accompaniment for the actual performance as well?"

I quietly asked Mafuyu that question as I was putting the scores back on the racks of the dark storeroom. Mafuyu stared at my face, then lowered her head.

She can't? Mafuyu's inerasable scars were inflicted on her when she was on the stage, so even though she could play the piano during our practices, if we were talking about her playing under the spotlight—

But..... the sound of her piano played an important role in guiding our class through the whole song. We definitely depended on Mafuyu's accompaniment to help coordinate the chorus to my

conducting.

It was then that I suddenly thought of something.....

"Then..... how about this. At the very least....."

Mafuyu listened to my request with a helpless expression on her face. After much deliberation, she finally said to me, hoarsely,

"..... Do I have to?"

"Mmm, yes!" I nodded my head calmly.

"So that means you do not want to attend the concert with Kyouko?"

"No, that's not it." For some unknown reason, Mafuyu was particularly fixated on that. To me, it didn't matter who got the ticket. It's just—

"I want to beat Senpai. I want to show Senpai the things you and I can do together, so I'll definitely need your help."

Mafuyu bit her lip; and her gaze fell to the floor.

So it still won't do huh..... Just as I was about to apologize to Mafuyu, she suddenly lifted her head and said,

"..... I understand..... I will give it a try."

I grabbed her hands and swung them around excitedly.

With this, we might finally be on par with Senpai—for the set piece anyway. So what's left..... is the choice piece.

Senpai said we were worthy of being her opponents. Senpai believed in me. Chiaki believed in me. And Mafuyu believed in me as well.

I won't let her call us "an easy victory" again.



Prior to band practice that day, I decided to make a trip to the music preparatory room, to ask Miss Maki some questions..... meaning I'd be investigating the judges.

"There's no point in bribing me."

Miss Maki said that to me right as I stepped into the room. Her

hair was rolled up, and she was wearing a pure white blouse and a tight skirt. This music teacher of ours looked like the perfect teacher, straight out of a guy's fantasy, but in actual fact, she was a violent lady who acted on her whims.

"Because I have to go along with the preferences of the head! And I'll even have to say things like, 'Ara, Mrs. Hayase has such an incredible sense of music! Ohohohoho~'. What a pain....."

What appeared in my mind was the face of another judge—Mrs. Hayase, the head teacher of the second years. She looked like an idle and rich lady, but was actually a really strict middle-aged woman.

"Please don't reveal complicated inside stories like that to your students without any reservations!"

"But you're here for those complicated inside stories, right? You're trying to bribe me so you can beat Kagurazaka."

When did I ever say anything about a bribe? Also, that means the details of our contest with Senpai have reached the ears of the teachers already?

"No, I'm just here to check on the judges' preferences in music."

"How much?"

"Eh?"

"How much are you paying me?"

Oi! Damn you! You just said you wouldn't accept my bribes, and now you're asking me to bribe you!? I gripped my knees hard to suppress my anger, and squeezed out the following words,

"In exchange, I'll bring you the cream puffs sold at the pastry shop next to the station."

"I'll take four!"

Damn her for taking the opportunity to ask for a bribe.....

"You should know our principal's a Christian, right? He was the one who chose the set piece, so you can't go wrong if you choose a gospel or something like that. In past years, the judge chosen by the students tended to award high scores for rock and pop music. And as for Mrs. Hayase, her preferences are harder to grasp. She likes



movies and TV series, so you guys can try investigating along those lines?"

"But how do we go about investigating that? By asking her directly? I've never attended any of her lessons before, and haven't even spoken to her once."

"Who knows? Come up with something yourself. Kagurazaka has already asked her."

Ah! So Miss Maki told Senpai the same things as well? Seems like we're a step behind her.

"Mmm, I'm craving some pastries already! It's all up to you now, Nao!"

Because I was angry at Miss Maki for demanding a bribe, I ended up buying only a single cream puff and cut it into quarters before giving it to her. It's obvious I was severely beaten up by her.



It wasn't like Miss Maki's information was totally useless though. We at least knew we had to focus our attention on Mrs. Hayase.

I wandered to the staff room in an attempt to look for Mrs. Hayase. However, Kagurazaka-senpai was already in the office, at the table of the head of the second years.

I hid myself behind a compartment wall and peeked at them. Mrs. Hayase was holding on to Kagurazaka-senpai and lecturing her. No surprises there. Kagurazaka-senpai was a bad student that hardly attended lessons. So she probably gets summoned to the staff room occasionally to get lectured by the teachers, right? But upon listening closer, I realized their conversation had somehow turned into something like "Right, right! That's the song! I don't know the name of the song, but I've heard it in a movie soundtrack before....." "Ah..... then it is probably....." Senpai's ability to get others to talk is really scary.....

I then thought of something—

All I need to do is to stay close to Senpai, and slowly piece together the information she has gathered, right?

No, but..... that would mean we'd be progressing at the same pace as Senpai. If we wanted to defeat her, we'd have to overtake her by a long distance.

The conversation between Kagurazaka-senpai and Mrs. Hayase had already finished by the time I was done considering all these things. How can this be!? I actually missed the important details at the most crucial moment!



"It seems the First Class of Second Year has chosen their choice piece."

The news came to us the next day after school. It seemed the First Class of Second Year was really enthusiastic about the contest as well. Not only did they put defenses up against our spy, they even rallied together to berate him when he went to the music room to gather intelligence. Regardless of all that though..... he still managed to bring us precious information.

"I heard them clapping to the beats. They were clapping and singing at the same time, so it shouldn't be the set piece, right?"

"What type of song was it?"

Chiaki strangled the spy's neck in an attempt to squeeze all the information out of him.

"I-I have nothing else. That was all I heard."

"If they've decided on their choice piece, they should've submitted it to the student council already. We'll be able to find out if we check there?"

A gleam shone from Terada's glasses right after she heard that suggestion from one of the guys in our class.

"Alright! Go!"



Terada's really scary! Our spy flew out of the classroom immediately after her instruction, and came back within five minutes.

"It's crazy! The student council room has turned into a battlefield! The killing auras of the students are getting stronger as the contest draws nearer."

"That's not important. Did you manage to get your hands on any intel?"

Terada's voice was incredibly harsh. It felt as though she was pressing him for answers by stepping on his head with her shoes.

"Yes Boss! There was a stack of papers piled on the table that looked like the registration forms. I did my best and snapped a picture of them with my handphone."

They're already working so hard (in the wrong manner) for this chorus contest, so what sort of crazy stunts will our class pull when sports day rolls around? I shuddered at the thought. But I still looked at the screen of my classmate's handphone.

The first thing I saw was a messy table with papers and stationery scattered all over it. A familiar piece of paper was clipped beneath the cover of the contest brochures..... It was the paper for writing down the selected choice pieces. I could make out the characters "2-1" in the space for entering the class, but—

"We can't see the name of the song because it's covered up! You are really useless!"

The spy could only tremble under the cold and harsh words of Terada. The cover of the brochure overlapped with the area where the names of the choice pieces were filled in.

"Wait. We can still see the edge."

Said Mafuyu, who was looking at the screen together with me. Our foreheads almost came into contact.

"What's written on it? The image quality is bad."

"It's probably written in shorthand."

Mafuyu turned the screen horizontally and squinted at the screen. She then said in a soft voice,

"What is written on it is..... *Queen*."

Queen?

A strange voice escaped from my throat.

Sparks of fire bursted all over the place. The various thoughts in my mind lined themselves up together in an instant.

"Do you know what it is?"

I nodded my head in response to Mafuyu's question.

The band, Queen.

They're a legendary rock band from England, famous for their beautiful and catchy melodies, as well as their rich choruses—if we wanted to choose a rock piece for our choice piece, a song by Queen would definitely be the best choice.

I recalled Miss Maki's words again—

The principal likes gospels. And the students' representative usually awards high marks for rock or pop songs. Kagurazaka-senpai should've obtained information similar to mine, and should've also gathered some additional information from her conversation with Mrs. Hayase. And Senpai did say before, that they'd be going down the path of rock this year.

Combining all these points..... and assuming they chose a song by Queen—

*"I heard them clapping to the beats."*

"..... I got it."

"Eh?"

"I know the piece Senpai chose."

Chiaki stared at me as well.

"A song by Queen, clapping to the beats, and that has a gospel feel to it..... Only one song fulfills all those criteria and is usable for the chorus contest."

Chiaki realized what the song was as well, and we said the name of the song together at the very same time.

"<Somebody to Love>."

# ♪ ♪

"Is it okay to choose the same song they did?"

Mafuyu asked that question when we were sitting on the bench on the platform, waiting for the train home.

Right after deducing the song chosen by Kagurazaka-senpai's class, the Third Class of First Year immediately submitted the name of our choice piece to the student council. It was none other than <Somebody to Love>. After much consideration, I decided that the only way we could truly win, was by choosing the same choice piece as Senpai's class.

"They'll directly compare us to Senpai's class if we sing the same song as them."

Chiaki obviously felt uneasy about it as well. I deliberately ignored their expressions and replied,

"Senpai's class is indeed stronger than ours when it comes to singing. We won't be able to compete against them in that. However....."

I wasn't very confident either, so I couldn't look straight at their faces. I only stared at my opened palms.

"If that's the case, it'll be the same regardless of the song we choose. Therefore, we must use the weapons that only we possess."

"Weapons?"

In <Somebody to Love>, the main vocals are sung by a six-part chorus. Despite sounding like a gospel, it's still a classic rock song.

"We have a bassist, a guitarist and a drummer in our class."

Chiaki stared at me with her eyes open wide.

"..... U-Us?"

I nodded.

Senpai said she had a one-against-three disadvantage, so we should make full use of our advantage without hesitation. Chiaki, Mafuyu, and I were all we needed to form a rock band. That was our unique weapon that Senpai's class didn't have.

"But..... putting the guitars aside, the organizers definitely won't

allow us to place a drum set on the stage! What are we going to do about that?"

"I have two sets of mini electronic drums at my house, so let's use those. The volume should be just right as long as we have a set of speakers. You play the drums the same as you normally would, so it should be easy."

The train arrived before we knew it. The noise it produced as it approached the station sounded as though it were attempting to crush the surging emotions inside me. I shoved that oppressive feeling aside and stood up between the two girls. I stood by the safety line and turned my head around to look at the surprised Chiaki, as well as Mafuyu, who had a vexed expression in her eyes.

"—Let's rock!"



As expected of a school that used to offer music as a major, the atmosphere at school was really heated the day of the chorus contest. The school broadcasted Haydn's oratorios in the morning, and the canopy of the music hall was modified specifically for the chorus contest, with the event's name printed across it..... If only they'd direct some of the chorus contest funds towards supporting the various clubs instead.

It had been an hour since the contest had begun. Our classmates squeezed together like a pack of sardines at the right side of the stage and pried the curtains open slightly, to peek at the audience through the gap. The teaching staff seated in the first row already had irritated expressions on their faces. They must've been tired of listening to <Ave verum corpus>, as they had heard it almost ten times already.

"Miss Maki has already fallen asleep....."

Right after I finished saying that, Mafuyu whispered in my ears.

"Then wake her up with your baton."

I was going to do that even if you didn't tell me to. I wiped my palms on my trousers to wipe off the sweat.

The order of the performances had been decided randomly, and

Senpai's class had been assigned to perform three spots after us. This is great for us—their morale might lower after hearing our performance.

"Hey Nao, did you see the program guide?"

Chiaki asked, after returning from backstage.

"The one they distributed in the morning? Nope."

I had no time to look at it, due to my nervousness.

"I see..... Nevermind, it's nothing much. It's too late to do anything anyway."

"..... What?"

"They're about to end soon."

I was quite concerned about what Chiaki meant, but the sparse applause, and the sound of the class before us walking off the steps, shattered the uneasiness inside me.

One by one, under the rays of the spotlights, the students of Third Class of First Year began making their way onto the stage. I'll be the last one to walk onstage.

Holding the baton in my hands, I suddenly thought—Ebichiri must have tasted this solitary feeling a few thousand times already, right? Being a conductor is really tough; I never want to conduct ever again.

But..... this time's an exception.

The emcee introduced our class and our choice piece, then announced the names of the conductor and the accompaniment. I turned my head to look at one of the event committee members. The thing he held in his hands was..... my bass.

"We're really sorry for making such requests."

We had gone through great pains to obtain permission from the organizers to incorporate guitars and drums into our performance. Some of the nice people on the event committee knew about our contest with Kagurazaka-senpai and helped us in secret.

"I'll be depending on you when the set piece is over."

"Do your best!"



After nodding to each other, I began walking towards the stage doused in the lights.

Cheers and loud applause rang from my side. Wait, the performance hasn't even started yet, so why are they already so excited? The other classes didn't receive the same treatment we did. I even heard someone shouting "Defeat Kagurazaka!" Just how far did news of the contest spread? Standing at the front of the stage, I opened my hands to quell the noise of the audience.

I looked in the direction of the piano, and saw Mafuyu's pale face behind the raised cover of the black piano. She hadn't taken her seat yet—she was just staring at the keys. This doesn't look good.

The gaze and the cheers of the audience caused Mafuyu's fingers to become unable to move.

"Nao—"

Just then, as the noise of the audience gradually receded, I heard Chiaki's voice from the highest level of the terraced stage. She shot a gaze of reproach and plea in Mafuyu's direction, as though she was saying to me "Come up with something!"

She's right. I was the one that asked Mafuyu to play the accompaniment, so I have to do something.

I walked over to the piano. Mafuyu's shoulders flinched. Then, she sat down.

"I am..... okay."

Mafuyu mumbled. However, her hands were placed stiffly on the piano.

I repositioned myself next to the piano to block Mafuyu's view of the audience.

There was no need for her to pay attention to the audience. The only one she had to look at was me.

"Mmm. It'll be alright." I had considered my words carefully before speaking them out loud. At the same time, I was careful to not let Mafuyu see how tightly I was holding the baton. "This is just practice. It's the same as Mozart warming up before his actual performance. It's not a big deal."

After a while, Mafuyu raised her head to stare at me. She then looked beyond the curtains to the side of the stage. The Stratocaster was sitting on its stand, waiting for the crazy atmosphere that would come later.

Mafuyu looked at me once more, then nodded her head. Her eyes had regained their liveliness—and in them, was my reflection alone.

The instant I gently lifted my baton, it felt like everyone in the music hall had their breaths sucked away.

It felt as though someone was descending from the sky, walking on transparent stairs with light steps—how did she manage to play that sort of sound on the piano? I had no idea. I began making my way to the stand, walking backwards; Mafuyu was getting further and further away from me. The ensemble gradually came into view, and all I did was pinch the baton to guide them gently—their voices began to flow, gushing out of the overflowing fountain.

There should've been some who noticed, right? Mafuyu's piano ended on the weakest of tones, and gradually faded away—as though it were sending off the exalted voices. Who else noticed that aside from Mafuyu and me? That was the agreement we had made back when Mafuyu and I were alone. <Ave verum corpus> was originally composed for the ensemble, the strings and the organ, so a piano would've destroyed the penetrative melody of the piece. Therefore, Mafuyu and I decided to have the piano fade away during the actual contest, without anyone noticing. All Mafuyu had to do was play the opening for us—that was what I had asked Mafuyu to do. There was no longer any sound coming from the piano. Other than the singing voices, all that remained were the sounds of the illusory string instruments. Can everyone else hear those sounds as well?



Right after my fingertips sucked away the harmony that had dragged on till the very last moment, a loud roar of applause erupted behind me. The imaginary sounds of the strings had disappeared,

and what replaced them was the heated sweat coming from my back. I scanned the flushed faces of my classmates—everyone had an expression of disbelief on their face. I counted the steps of the event committee member running towards us, while enjoying the applause of the audience behind me.

Senpai had said before—the pleasure of experiencing the applause coming from behind you is a privilege exclusive only to conductors. I recall she was borrowing the words of Ebichiri? I see, it may be just as he said. Right now..... I'm experiencing the pleasure myself, but —

Tossing away the baton, I took my bass from the hands of the committee member, then turned myself to face the audience. In the direction of the spotlights, I could see the applause slowly turning into an uproar. Seems like everyone's surprised—I am indeed a rocker at heart.

I still preferred to face the audience.

In the corner of my eye was Mafuyu, who had left her seat without making a sound. She picked up her guitar and began strumming it with her pick. Next, were the cheap and blaring sounds of Chiaki's electronic drums, rolling along with the melody—<Somebody to Love>.

Right after I strummed my bass, I felt a vibration travel throughout my body. The nostalgic bass assaulted my stomach, and my singing voice began to naturally flow out of my throat. The rich chorus of over thirty people came rushing from behind my back. It was an incredibly indulgent piece of rock music. My thoughts of winning the contest had already been thrown way out of my head. But it was a shame..... that we were lacking the sound of Senpai's guitar.

There was a brief moment of silence in the middle of the song. The strange-sounding chants beneath the clapping tempo began to gush their way up, stacking themselves in layers, one after another. In the end, after a violent explosion, the performance cascaded into the finale. The only thing I could see were the glittering lights reflected by the drops of sweat flying around me. I had no idea where Senpai was. Did we manage to carve our performance into her heart?



Even after holing myself up in the restroom for fifteen minutes, I still wasn't able to return my heated body back to normal. When we finished our song, aside from the vigorous applause, I also heard what sounded like cursing and cheers mixed together. It felt like those sounds were still reverberating in my ears. The throbbing of my heart persisted for a long time.

The performance of the First Class of Second Year was about to start, but my legs were void of any strength to stand up. I asked myself, "Am I scared of listening to their performance?" How can I not be? I did think we performed really well, and I wanted be optimistic about our chances of winning—but for some strange reason, I was unconvinced. It's Kagurazaka-senpai we're talking about here..... Even though they're performing the exact same piece as ours after us, and even though they lack the accompaniment of the bass and the drums..... Do they really not possess any sort of secret weapon?

It's pointless for me to hide in here any longer! I hammered my knees with my fists, and finally stood up. What I wanted to hear was the chorus of Senpai's class. How is Senpai going to go about presenting it?

I walked down the corridor and pushed open the heavy double doors of the music hall. The performance had reached the final chorus of <Ave verum corpus> and was fading into the dark. I looked at the stage and was surprised at what I saw. The long hair tied into two braids—I recognized the back of Kagurazaka-senpai in an instant. She was standing right in the middle of the stage, and facing her, was the ensemble of her class, whose grey silhouettes were arranged neatly on the terraced stage.

Looking at the clothes the girls were wearing, even without the veil, one could easily recognize their attire as that of a nun. So the school actually allowed them to dress up like that. Well, I guess the school's pretty lax about the restrictions.

When I returned to my seat, my classmates around me whispered, "Where have you been, conductor?"

"It'd be bad if we got calls for an encore!" "I really wish I could sing once more!" "Yeah—"

After I settled down in my seat, a hand reached out to me from behind, and something appeared before my eyes. Oh, the program guide for the chorus contest. I turned my head around—it was Chiaki who passed me that.

"..... What?"

"The song Senpai's class chose wasn't <Somebody to Love>."

For a brief moment, I couldn't understand what Chiaki had said. Just as I took the guide from her in shock, the sound of a piano began to ring on stage.

I turned my head back to the stage and listened to their singing.

It began with an almost silent singing that praised Virgin Mary—no accompaniment, just a simple harmony. I finally realized my mistake —

The elegant hymn was interrupted by the abrupt sounds of a piano. What came next was a passionate rhythm, formed from the sounds of hands clapping and feet stomping. The same melody from before coordinated itself to this tempo—there were times when they resonated with each other, and times when they screamed in contrast—

That's..... one of the songs that appeared in the movie <Sister Act>—

<Hail Holy Queen>.

The tempo of the hymn was increased for that song, and the hymn itself, rearranged, to form the final product. In the movie, the song served to reignite the burning passion of the sisters, and brought the younger generation into the church once more. And now, back in reality, it glued our sights to the stage. I couldn't breathe. Why didn't I notice it then? The "*Queen*" Mafuyu had seen in the picture wasn't the name of the band, but the last word of the name of the song. Why didn't I realize it was a hymn and a rock piece at the same time? Why? After all, it's possible to create rock with only singing, the hands and the feet.....

Senpai's hair swung wildly, like the tail feathers of a bird, as she

turned her body around. When she started to bring her hands up to her head to lead the audience into a clap, the whole music hall was swallowed up by the atmosphere. Her class's chorus and claps were overshadowed by Senpai's powerful solo performance. The song ended with an amazing round of applause, and cheers that were comparable to an avalanche. Despite my chagrin, I still applauded as hard as I could.

There was no need for the official results to come out to know who had won. I pitied the classes that had to perform after Senpai's class (and actually, quite a few people had gone home right after Senpai's performance). In the end, our class came in second. Chiaki had gone up the stage to receive the prize in my place, as I was completely drained. But my strength didn't return even after Chiaki had hit me hard using the rolled-up certificate.



Two days after the contest ended—

It was a Sunday night. We had agreed to meet next to the ticketing gates of a busy train station in Tokyo. I was worried I wouldn't be able to spot her, but those worries were all for nothing. Kagurazaka-senpai appeared near the stairs wearing a glamorous purple gown. Despite being roughly two hundred meters away from me, she still stood out from the crowd. Beneath the lace shawl, I could clearly see that the back of her revealing gown cut deep down; and that made my heart skip a beat. Her hair was tied elegantly into a bun, which made her look like a celebrity invited to some grand party. In contrast, I was wearing a mediocre suit, so it was a little embarrassing.

And that wasn't the end of the surprises. "Sorry I'm late. Let's go." Just as Senpai finished saying that, she wrapped her arm around mine, nearly causing me to fall.

"You seem nervous. This shouldn't be your first time attending a classical music concert, right?"

"You're not wrong....." But this is my first time attending one together with a girl.

"Then again, I was way more surprised than you were!"

Senpai began talking about the contest as we made our way to the concert hall. But since the event had ended on what I felt was an embarrassing note, I was hoping no one would talk about it.

"Are you that dissatisfied with the results? Your choice of song and your performance were both pretty good. I never thought you guys would pull out a Queen's song for the chorus contest."

"No, you see..... there was a lot behind it."

I never told Senpai why we chose to perform <Somebody to Love>, because it was a really embarrassing misunderstanding.

According to one of the committee members, there was a huge gap between the scores of the winner and the scores of the runner-up. And it wasn't just because the principal had awarded really high marks for the hymn—it was obvious, from the reactions and the atmosphere of the audience, that the victory belonged to Senpai's class. We thoroughly lost to them.

"Ah, you see—"

Senpai tightened her grip on my arm and said,

"I think there was a much simpler reason for our win, that has nothing to do with how good or bad the performances were. The time signature of <Somebody to Love> is 6/8, right? It's a pretty dynamic song, but the time signature makes it hard for the audience to sway their bodies left and right to the beat while sitting in their chairs! I had actually considered using that song for the contest as well."

I glanced at Senpai's face and sighed.

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"No, nothing."

So my train of thought wasn't comprehensive enough..... How long will it take for me to finally catch up to this person here?

When the roof of the concert hall barely came into view among the buildings, Senpai suddenly said,

"But you guys were really strong opponents! I was proud to be able to compete against you."

Senpai stopped in her tracks for a moment and stared at my face,



with a suspicious smile on her own.

"And also, I'm in an excellent mood tonight because of my victory over you guys. You can do whatever you like, so have you booked a room at the hotel?"

"No no no no....."

When is she serious and when is she not?



All the seats in the concert hall were occupied. As expected of the world-renowned Ebichiri, the audience was mostly made up of slightly older fans that were all well-dressed. I couldn't see any young people around. While breathing in the smell of the summer night and the scent of perfume, I remembered I was there to critique the concert, so I pulled out my notebook. I then led the search for the numbers of our VIP front-row seats, pulling Senpai along by her arms.

I finally found the two empty seats, but was surprised by what I saw next.

To the left of the empty seats, was Mafuyu in a pale pink one-piece dress; and to the right, was Chiaki, who was actually wearing her school uniform; she probably didn't even consider the event she was attending.

..... W-Why? Why are both of them here?

"Oh my, what a coincidence!" said Senpai. Coincidence my ass! This is way beyond coincidence!

"Hurry up and take a seat. The concert is about to begin."

Mafuyu said softly, with a hint of unhappiness in her voice. After forcing me into the seat next to Mafuyu, Senpai sat down elegantly beside Chiaki.

"Mafuyu was the one who demanded the tickets! She actually managed to get them!"

I could feel my head aching. I see..... She must have means to do so, since she's Ebichiri's daughter. But to deliberately get the tickets for the seats flanking ours..... Just how unreasonable is she!? Did

you really have to do that?

"She probably didn't want us to be by ourselves."

Senpai looked past me, at Mafuyu's face, with a huge smile on her own. The silent Mafuyu nodded her head with a flushed face. Just what's going on here? I don't get it at all! Considering all the trouble we had gone through for the contest and stuff, wouldn't it have been much easier if she had done this right at the very beginning?

"Isn't this perfect, young man?" Senpai nudged me with her shoulders. "Everyone ended up a winner. How nice it would be if all wars ended like this!"

Though my feeling is that Senpai's the only real winner here, but—ahhh, whatever!

"Speaking of which, is it too late for us to call the hotel and request to change to a four-person suite?"

"Did Nao really book a room at the hotel!?" Chiaki jumped up.

"W-Wait, don't lie, Senpai! Ah, oww oww oww, stop that Mafuyu! It hurts! You can't bend the human fingers like that!"

While we were stirring up a ruckus, the orchestra had finished tuning. Ebisawa Chisato finally appeared on the stage, amid a thunderous applause.

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## Notes

1. 聞こえる (Kikoeru), roughly translated as 'To be Heard'

## Chapter 2 - To the Memory of an Angel

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After a brief intermission, the performance resumed with the third piece of the night—<Manfred Symphony>. <Manfred Symphony> is the longest symphony Tchaikovsky composed; and while the length of the piece might differ depending on the conductor, it typically lasts about an hour. The first movement starts off really slowly and is incredibly gloomy; and coupled with Ebichiri's calm and sturdy style of conducting, the piece was really tiring to listen to. Two seats away from me, Chiaki had already fallen asleep on Kagurazaka-senpai's shoulder.

In the beginning, I thought to myself, "Why are they playing the piece so slowly? The audience might criticize them harshly for that, no?" But in the third movement, the atmosphere somehow became even more suffocating than before, and I was forcefully pulled into the meditative sounds. But when the performance entered the last movement, which had a rigorous military feel to it, I actually sat up and straightened out my sitting posture.

Ebichiri waved his arms and lifted the orchestra to an incredibly high height; then, with a swing of the baton, he ended the most rousing section of the piece at the climax.

After a moment of blankness, which made me feel as though I were looking down from atop a dangerous cliff—

A ray of light descended from the sky—it was an elegant chorale played by the organ. I felt a jolt of electricity run up my spine, and goosebumps appeared all over my body.

I used to think <Manfred Symphony> was a boring piece of music, but in that moment, everything changed. I had never heard an interpretation like that before—with the conductor bringing the whole piece to its climax in such a saddening and theatrical fashion.

The piece ended as if it were sucked into the air. But for quite a long while, there was no clapping—or even coughing—to be heard.

Only after Ebichiri had let go of his baton, did the audience finally jolt back to its senses. It started with sparse applause scattered here and there; then, the whole music hall became engulfed in a whirlpool of applause, which only grew larger and larger. Before I had even realized, I was already up on my feet and clapping.

I shot a glance beside me. Mafuyu was sitting in her chair, clapping with an unhappy expression on her face.

"That was really impressive."

I could faintly hear Kagurazaka-senpai's voice.

"I've never heard <Manfred Symphony> go along so well with an organ. The tempo felt like it was barely containing something within it..... So it was all for that final moment?"

The audience continued applauding, even after Ebichiri had stepped down from the stage. The orchestra continued tuning as well. A special feature of Ebichiri's concerts were his encores, which always turned out to be interesting and unique performances. I wanted to sort out my thoughts, so I took out my notebook and pen.

After returning back on stage, Ebichiri spread his arms out, signaling the audience to quiet down. The noise of the audience gradually faded away.

"I am thankful to have the honor of meeting everyone here tonight."

Ebichiri said that with a stern face. He always uttered that line prior to his encore. "Narcissist," said Mafuyu softly beside me. I did agree with her slightly.

"We have invited a special guest here today, a soloist. He should not be appearing here tonight, so those of you in the music industry, please try to publicize this as little as possible, or else I will be in for some trouble with the record company."

A few guffaws came from beneath the stage. A soloist who only appears during the encore? I had never heard of something like that before.

"I believe everyone should know him well, but I think it is only proper that I introduce him. Please welcome Julien Flaubert."

Ebichiri's announcement caused a huge commotion in the audience.

I remembered hearing that name somewhere before, so I frantically searched through my memories. I ended up not hearing what Mafuyu was saying beside me.

Julien. Julien Flaubert.....

The commotion in the hall turned into a warm round of applause again. I quickly lifted my head in shock.

At the side of the stage appeared a small silhouette of someone holding a violin beneath his arm. He walked past the members of the orchestra and made his way to the conductor's stand at the middle of the stage.

At first, I thought the person was a girl, as I could only see the upper body—the person had huge eyes, fiery red lips, and shiny golden hair that glittered under the spotlights.

However, the petite violinist standing next to Ebichiri was wearing a tuxedo. "Yuri?" mumbled Mafuyu. I finally remembered who he was.

Julien Flaubert.

The violinist was more widely known by his nickname "Yuri" than by his actual name. It was his nickname back when he was pursuing his studies at the Moscow Conservatory—a fact that was well known, even in Japan. He was always praised for possessing "the looks of an angel," or "sublime techniques, as if he were Yehudi Menuhin reborn," etc. He was a celebrity violinist with crazed fans all over the globe. It was said that magazine sales would increase many fold whenever his pictures were published. His frequent appearance on the covers of classical music magazines was how I got to know of him. He always wore a serious and stern expression in the magazine pictures, but he actually exuded an air of innocence similar to that of a typical middle school girl (even though he was a guy). He was roughly Mafuyu's height as well. I think he's one year younger than me?

Julien stood at the conductor's stand and bowed elegantly. His movement silenced everyone in the hall.

No one made a sound. Julien lifted his bow, but I saw almost no movement from Ebichiri as he conducted. The clarinets and oboes raised a serious inquiry, and Julien's violin replied with a solo. Then,

the background accompaniment of the orchestra began to slowly spread its wings.

This song is—

Alban Berg's Violin Concerto.

The concerto dedicated <To the Memory of an Angel> was composed in remembrance of a young girl that had passed away; it was Berg's final piece before he died due to blood poisoning. The violin solo and the orchestra wove together to create a sorrowful fricative; the melody sounded like it was sobbing softly.

I didn't even notice my notebook had slipped out of my hands.

It really felt like there were wails coming from someone high above.

The intense allegro of the second movement told the story of the girl and her pains struggling against her sickness. An intense chromatic phrase, which felt like it was shaved from Julien's slender body, was finally surrounded by the death that purified everything. The phrase then merged itself with the calm adagio.

The solo violin began playing its highest note, while, at the same time, absorbing all the sounds of the orchestra. When the piece was finally over, and the music had faded away silently, there was barely a hint of liveliness left in the music hall. The mood was completely different compared to that after <Manfred Symphony>.

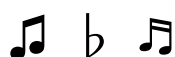
Even so, the young boy in the middle of the stage placed his bow and violin down. After he showed the audience a gentle smile akin to that of an angel, the atmosphere in the hall melted immediately.

The applause of the audience was like an endless avalanche.

I was clapping my hands together in a daze. I then realized he wasn't offering his smile to everyone in the audience, but only to a specific person.

Is it me? No wait—

I realized the shocking truth and looked at the seat beside me—Mafuyu sank herself deep into her seat with an absent-minded expression on her face.



Tetsurou had actually put a great deal of effort into preparing a bouquet for me to offer to Ebichiri. It's sad to say though—not only did he choose narcissuses, which were out of season, he also told me, "Listen to this properly Nao. Narcissus means 'conceited' in the language of flowers! Be sure to tell him that when you offer him the bouquet!" What an idiot.

After the concert was over, I told the girls to wait for me in the lobby. Just as I was about to head to the lounge backstage, Mafuyu grabbed the hem of my suit and gave it a tug.

"Yes?"

"..... I'm coming along."

Why? I mean, Ebichiri will be in the lounge too, yeah? It's not possible for Mafuyu to want to go there just to see him, right? I then thought of Julien. (It looked like) Flaubert was staring at Mafuyu back then.....

There should be a reason for that, right? Perhaps they knew each other?

The corridor leading to the lounge was filled with members of the orchestra, as well as the large instruments. Since the performing band was the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the conversations I heard all around me were all spoken in English. I was at a loss at what to do.

Just then, one of the members of the orchestra spotted Mafuyu hiding behind my back, and walked towards us after blurting out what sounded like "Oh!" We quickly became surrounded by the orchestra. That was proof Mafuyu was famous in the professional world as well.

"Urm, well....."

Mafuyu pushed me aside when I tried to talk to them in Japanese. She began to converse with the middle-aged French horn player in incredibly authentic-sounding American English. She then turned around to look at me, pointed at the end of the corridor with an unhappy expression on her face, and said,

"He said Papa finds the interviewers irritating, so he is hiding in that room."

I see..... As expected of someone who came back from America not too long ago, her English was really impressive. For some reason, I found myself more and more useless.

The orchestra member brought us to a smaller lounge deep inside the corridor. Just as I was about to grab the doorknob to open the door, the door suddenly opened from inside. "Mafuyu!" A small person, with a voice filled with excitement, squeezed through the opening and hugged me all of a sudden.

"..... Whoaaaa!?"

"Mafuyu, I miss you so much!"

My nose came into contact with soft golden hair. Right after I realized the person was Julien Flaubert, he hugged me tightly with his slender arms and buried his face deep in my chest. There was a faint scent of roses coming from his hair—no wait! I became flustered all of a sudden and quickly pushed his body away.

"W-What are you doing?"

"Ah, sorry. I was mistaken."

Julien looked at my face and said that in a nonchalant manner, then tiptoed slightly to kiss me lightly on the cheek. I remained rooted to the ground as he turned his attention to Mafuyu.

"I miss you so much, ma chérie!"

What surprised me even more, was that Mafuyu didn't yell at him or hit him, despite him hugging her tightly. She only put on a slightly unhappy expression as she silently let him kiss her cheeks lightly. The French are really impressive—with only half of my brain functioning properly, that was all I could think.





Mafuyu noticed my gaze, and her face turned red. She pushed Julien away.

"..... W-When did you come to Japan?"

"Yesterday. I am planning to stay in Japan for a while, so we can see each other every day. Before today's encore, I heard from Maestro Ebisawa that Mafuyu would be coming to listen to the concert, so I requested—"

There was a sudden cough. I finally saw Ebichiri sitting in front of the dressing table deep inside the room.



"You are here in Hikawa's place, right? So that means you will be writing the critique? Mmm..... I am looking forward to it."

Ebichiri said that with a serious expression on his face. You're scaring me with your expectations.....

The four of us sat down, face to face, on the sofas in the lounge. I was sitting right in front of Ebichiri, while Mafuyu was sitting to my side. And for some unknown reason, Julien sat himself behind Mafuyu and me, on the back of the sofa. Please, can you just sit down properly? You're making me really uncomfortable.

"Critique? He's writing it?"

Julien suddenly grabbed my hair and stretched his body over my head to look at my face, almost causing me to nearly fall over. Even at such a close distance, he still looked like a girl. His peach-red lips were right before my eyes, and I was reminded of what had happened earlier. I do hope he'll keep his distance from me.

"That is rude of you, Flaubert. Sit down properly! The person whose hair you messed up may look young, but he is a music critic. He is our opponent."

Julien disappeared from my sight all of a sudden. I see..... He stood beside the sofa and stared at Ebichiri with his eyes opened wide, then turned his head in my direction and stared at me. It was only up-close that I realized he was really skinny and small. He might actually have a smaller build than Mafuyu.

I thought he was going to sit beside Ebichiri, but unexpectedly, he sat himself down next to me. The sofa was only a two-seater, so Mafuyu, Julien and I had no choice but to squeeze in together. What's with this? Is he making fun of me?

"Is that so? Then I am really sorry! Nice to meet you for the first time, Mr.Critic. As you already know, I am a violinist. I would be happy if you could address me as 'Yuri.'"

He stretched out his hand as he introduced himself. The content's a little strange, but his Japanese is quite fluent..... Did he learn from Ebichiri? However, there was a strange expression in Julien's eyes, and I didn't quite know what it was. Hostility? Contempt? A sense of wariness? Or perhaps curiosity? His expression looked like a mix of everything, but, at the same time, also didn't seem like any of the above as well.

I hesitated for a while before shaking his hand stiffly. I felt a sense of incongruity. Why do I feel like this?

"My enemy, what is your name?"

"..... Eh? A-Ah. My name is Hikawa. Hikawa Naomi." Even though he was younger than me, he spoke to me in a casual tone, as though he were conversing with someone his own age. I unconsciously responded in a very polite manner.

"Can I call you 'Naomi'?"

I was stunned. Mafuyu, who was beside me, looked like she wanted to say something as well. Aside from my mother, whom I met with once a month after the divorce, the only other person to address me directly by my real name was Mafuyu.

However, the way Julien pronounced my name was quite different from the way Mafuyu pronounced it—probably because the name "Naomi" is in the English language as well? It just didn't sound like my name.

"Yuri....." Mafuyu, who was sitting on the other side of the sofa, suddenly spoke. "You can't."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Julien, as he propped himself over my shoulder to look at Mafuyu.

"You cannot call him that."

"Why?"

"You just can't."

Why? I was at a loss at what was happening around me. Then

again, why does Ebichiri look angry as well?

"Urm, well..... Everyone calls me "Nao," so if you can, please address me as that."

"So what instrument does Naomi play?"

"Listen to what I'm saying here, okay!?" "Stupid Yuri!"

"But I do not think it's good to shorten the names of others, or address them by another name!"

"Didn't you ask me to address you as 'Yuri' when you introduced yourself!?"

Julien stood up from the sofa with teary eyes and hid himself behind Ebichiri's back. He placed his hands on the sofa like a cat and said,

"Maestro, why is he so fierce with his tsukkomi?"

"That is nothing. Speaking to his father is much more tiring than that. And he has only become like this because he is surrounded by many such people." And you're one of them, Ebichiri!

"So he fits the mold of a critic very well?" Julien replied. Just what exactly are critics in the eyes of you two? Being a critic isn't just about tsukkomi-ing musicians who are hard to communicate with, you know?

"But the skin on your left fingers is very tough, so you should play some sort of instrument, right?"

I was shocked. Julien walked to my side and lifted my left hand.

"Well....."

"Naomi is the bassist of our band," said Mafuyu. Julien and I were both slightly surprised by that, so we both stared at Mafuyu's face. From the corners of my eyes, I could see an unhappy expression on Ebichiri's face.

"Mmm? So you are a companion of Mafuyu's?" Julien began to play around with my fingers as he said that. I found his reaction a little strange. He's not the least bit surprised that Mafuyu's in a band? Or did he know about it already? Just what is the relationship between the two of them? It's probably not the right time for me to ask him that.....

"Are you good with your bass?"

"No, not at all." "He is horribly bad at it."

The Ebisawa father-and-daughter pair answered at the same time, making me to sink into the abyss of depression. Why did you two have answer at the same time!? I know I suck at playing the bass!

"I knew it. These fingers are not used to create music. Instead, they exist to distort the truth."

I quickly waved Julien's hands away. What's with that!? Why are all his words filled with animosity? We only just met each other, and I don't think I've done anything to piss him off.

"..... Do you hate music critics?" I tried asking him. There were a lot of musicians who were like that.

"Mmm. I do."

Like the sun reappearing after a heavy downpour, a bright smile appeared on Julien's face as he answered me straightforwardly. I see. So you hate them huh—I almost wanted to smile when I said those words, to show him I approved of his reply.

"Oh, you mean you have not heard about the things those people have done to my precious Mafuyu?"

"Ah....."

I was at a loss for words.

"Yuri, stop that."

Mafuyu said that in a very stern tone and actually physically shielded me.

"But Mafuyu, you said before that you also hate those people?"

"But there is no need for you to say such things to Naomi."

"You used to talk about tying critics up and drying them under the sun so you could use them as fertilizer for the grapes. Back then, I thought the Japanese were a bunch of really scary people....."

"I never said that!" Mafuyu stood up with her face red.

"Flaubert is the one who said that."

Ebichiri sighed. The French are a bunch of really scary people.....

"Ah, is that so? But I remember Mafuyu talking about how that would make the grapes taste bad, making it a bad idea after all."

"Yuri is the one that said that as well! Geez! You idiot!"

Mafuyu stood up and stretched past my shoulders to slap Yuri hard on the head. Ebichiri and I exchanged looks of helplessness. You two can do what you want, but can you please not sandwich me in the middle of your quarrel?

In order to prevent myself from accidentally falling victim to Mafuyu's slaps, I shielded my head with my arms and ran away from the sofa. At the same time, just as Mafuyu was about to hit Julien with her right hand, he quickly grabbed her hand and entwined his fingers with hers.

"..... You should remember how those people only wrote nonsense after you could not play the piano, right? And recently, after the issue regarding your fingers was leaked, those people criticized you unfairly about your lack of professionalism, saying you were running away from the stage."

I stood up in shock and looked at them. I wasn't in any position to say anything, but—I had never thought the critics would discuss the issue of Mafuyu's fingers so brazenly.

"Are you still continuing your rehabilitation therapy? Though they do seem to be in much better shape....."

However, Mafuyu wasn't angry, and she didn't fling Julien's hand away either. All she did was lightly nod, murmuring,

"You do not have to worry. I will do something about it by myself."

I stared helplessly at Mafuyu's profile.

Since I met her, I had indirectly asked her about her fingers many times. I knew her fingers were immobile mainly because of a psychological issue, but I had never heard anything concrete from Mafuyu about whether or not she wanted to continue playing the piano.

I will do something about it by myself—that's what Mafuyu said, and it was my first time hearing her say that.

Does that mean she will try to do something "in order to play the

piano once more"?

If that's really the case, then—why didn't she tell me?

Was it because it was Julien who asked? Because they both live in the same world? Bask under the same brilliance, the same cheers and the same criticisms? Because they've tasted the same loneliness? Is that why she could say those words to him? If that's the case, then—

It seemed Ebichiri had said something to me, and Julien also, while staring at my face. However, I couldn't remember what I told them in reply. Why the heck am I here? I pondered that question repeatedly in my half blanked-out mind.



"Really? So he's really a guy..... What a shame."

There were only a few people left in the lobby. Kagurazaka-senpai said that as she pressed her hands against her forehead and shook her head. Senpai kept hounding me about Julien's sex the moment I mentioned meeting him. What the heck is this person normally thinking?

"What would you do if he were a girl?"

Chiaki, who had become drowsy while waiting for me, prodded Senpai's waist gently as she asked that question.

"Hmm? I guess I'd start by learning how to speak French....."

"Yuri can speak Japanese, and he is much more fluent at it than I am."

Mafuyu said softly behind me. Indeed, his Japanese was incredibly fluent.

A brief silence engulfed us. Chiaki kept staring at me.

"..... Urm, what's wrong?"

"You're not going to tsukkomi her?" Chiaki asked, pointing at Senpai.

"..... It's not like I exist in this world solely to tsukkomi stupid lines that are uttered around me."

"I don't live in this world purely for romance either—I have never forgotten about my revolution, you know. France is a country of revolutions as well, so it'll definitely be beneficial for me to learn more about the French."

"That's something you thought up only a second ago, right?"

"Oh! Nao's revived!" Chiaki said with approval. Don't be that happy. I only said it by accident!

I'll forget the content of the concert if I continue on with this stupid conversation. I began walking towards the exit of the concert hall. I better get home quickly to start on my draft.

"Hold on, wait! Nao, you're really mean! Senpai and I waited for you for so long, and you're planning to head home already?"

Chiaki caught up to me with her yells and her footsteps. Then, I heard two more pairs of footsteps—Mafuyu caught up as well, with Kagurazaka-senpai by her side. In the end, the four of us walked out of the main entrance together.

After walking past the row of tall trees that encircled the huge concert hall, I could see the rows of streetlights that were installed on the soundproof walls of the Tokyo highways. It was already pretty late. I didn't realize when I was listening to the piece, but the encore was actually really long, as they had played the whole concerto.

Despite it being a hard piece to understand, due to its complex tones, I was deeply attracted to it, which caused me to lose track of time.

"Naomi—"

Mafuyu called me. I turned my head around to look at her.

"Are you angry?"

"..... Why are you asking me that?" Angry? Who me?

I asked Mafuyu that in response. She immediately put on a troubled expression.

"I'd like to know what the relationship between Julien Flaubert and Comrade Mafuyu is! Just like the young man, right?"

"I'm also curious about—"



Mafuyu's face went red, due to the barrage of questions from all around her. She remained rooted at the spot, and looked a little overwhelmed. I turned my head around and saw her looking at me with a cry for help.

"Urm, well....." I was curious as well. "Is he your father's friend?"

Mafuyu mumbled something before nodding her head lightly.

"I remember seeing him on the cover of some fashion magazines. He and Ebichiri had gone on a tour in America too, right?"

So even Chiaki knew about Julien's existence? I never would've expected fashion magazines to write articles about him as well.

"..... That was a long time ago, when Papa was not the main conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra."

And that meant—he used to go on tours with Mafuyu as well? I do remember him saying something like "I'll be depending on the Ebisawa family during my stay in Japan".....

Mafuyu kept staring at my face. She waved her hands vigorously when I noticed her gaze.

"H-He was not with me that often..... and I was very busy."

"But you two took the same plane and stayed in the same hotel together, right?" Chiaki said.

"Mmm, yes....."

"Did he enter the male's bath or the female's bath?"

"There's no such thing in the hotels of America, right?"

"Oh right, have you and Yuri performed together before? There are some pieces that are performed only with the piano and violin, right?"

"There were plans for that, but none of them materialized....."

"So that boy is here specifically to see Comrade Ebisawa, right? You two share a really good relationship."

"Eh? U-Uhh....."



Mafuyu was getting more and more restless as the other two girls barraged her with all sorts of questions. I was following a few steps behind them, and as I stared at Mafuyu's long hair while walking, I suddenly thought of Julien's violin. I recalled his clear eyes and skin,

his pale red lips, and those cold slender fingers he grabbed my hands with.

Ahh—yes. The fingers.

Something had felt really out of place back then. Just like how Julien had noticed the skin on my left hand was rough, I had noticed the skin on his left fingers was hard as well. Of course, that wasn't strange, considering he was a violinist. But somehow, it felt like his fingertips weren't as slender as those of a violinist.

Why's that so?

"U-Urm....."

Mafuyu suddenly stopped in her tracks and turned around, causing me to nearly bump into her.

"You know, there is really nothing special going on between Yuri and me. We are just normal friends..... There r-really is nothing between us."

I was stunned. Why's she telling me this?

Mafuyu's face was so red it looked like steam was about to come out of her skin. She then turned her head away and walked quickly towards the train station.

Kagurazaka-senpai let out a snicker, then grabbed Chiaki and me by the arm and ran after Mafuyu.



It was already past ten when Chiaki and I reached our stop. Tokyo's really far away.

Even after the doors of the train had opened, I remained sitting in my seat with a blank expression on my face. It was only after Chiaki stomped me hard on the foot that I realized we had already arrived. I got off the train in a hurry.

"What are you spacing out for? Still thinking about Mafuyu and Yuri?"

As we walked past the ticket gates, Chiaki asked me that with a sinister expression on her face.

"Urm..... Yeah, kind of."

It was the first time I had seen someone speak with Mafuyu like that. Come to think of it, Mafuyu was the one who looked for him (and she did it despite knowing Ebichiri would be around as well). Even though my intentions were quite different from Senpai's, I was still very curious about the relationship between the two of them.

"Didn't Mafuyu say they're just friends?"

"Mmm..... That's true, but....."

For some reason, it felt like Mafuyu was acting really strange back then. She was incredibly flustered, and kept emphasizing that Julien was just a friend of hers—did she do that out of embarrassment?

"What do you mean out of embarrassment?"

"You weren't around, so you wouldn't know, but Mafuyu was okay with Julien hugging her and kissing her..... They might actually be a couple."

No wait, they weren't old enough back then, right? And Julien hugged me as well.

Chiaki stopped in her tracks at the nearly empty bus rotary and stared at me with a dumbfounded expression on her face.

"..... What?"

"Do you really mean..... what you just said?"

Wait, the expression in your eyes is really scary! Why are they shining brightly like those of a cat?

"Urm..... yeah."

Back when Chiaki was still practicing Judo, one time, I attended one of the competitions she was participating in. At the time, everyone was saying she "would definitely get into the district finals." When she closed in towards me with lightning quick speed and seized me, I was reminded of those perfect steps of hers I had seen at that competition. Before I could fully comprehend what was happening, the night sky streaked past my sight in a flash. My back slammed hard against the asphalt road. I could feel all the air in my lungs being squeezed out of my mouth, and a sharp numbing pain ran through my spine afterwards.

"That..... hurts....."

What are you doing!? I frowned. Then, just as I was about to get up, Chiaki's foot grazed my hair—it looked like she was trying to crush my head.

"Are you trying to kill me!?"

"You're unbelievable! Stupid Nao! You might as well die!"

Frightened, I hid myself in the bushes by the road. W-Why's she so angry?

"I can't take it anymore! I have to punch you! Otherwise, it's too sad for Mafuyu!"

"Why? Sorry, I'll apologize first, but what's wrong with Mafuyu?"

"What do you mean you'll apologize first!? Come out right now! That throw was for Mafuyu, and now, this body sweep will be for me!"

There's no way I'd obediently listen to that request. I continued hiding in the bushes, hugging my head. I suddenly heard someone walking on the grass, and next, I found myself being hoisted up from behind my neck. I raised my head and saw Chiaki's eyes burning with anger.

"Listen real carefully. If you ever say what you said just now directly to Mafuyu, you'd better be prepared for my cross armlock!"

"Y-Yes ma'am....."

I had no choice but to sit in seiza on the soil and reply to her politely.

After venting her anger out on me without reservation, Chiaki stomped away with the steps of a dinosaur. Damn, tonight's a really crazy night. Why the hell is everyone acting strange tonight?

♪ ♪ ♪

On the Monday of the following week, I was forced to face the rather unpleasant daily life of school again. Mafuyu turned her gaze away whenever our eyes met; and Chiaki stared at me all the time. And as for Senpai, she was incredibly happy seeing us act the way we were. As a side note, my classmates had been incredibly

pumped up ever since our decent result in the chorus contest, and instead of cooling themselves down after all the excitement, they began to focus their attention on the sports day, and were ardently preparing for it. To be honest, just being in the classroom was already tiring for me; but to add on to that, I still had to practice for the school festival's live performance as well, which drained me even more.

Then, *that* thing happened on Wednesday. Right when I returned home after band practice, Tetsurou came flying out of the living room. I have a bad feeling about this.

"Nao, Nao! Did you get yourself acquainted with someone from the music industry? It can't be, right?"

"..... What are you talking about?"

"Company M sent you a letter!"

I looked at the aqua-blue envelope Tetsurou had stuffed in my hands. It was from the company Tetsurou was under the care of. But the name "Hikawa Naomi" was written on the letter..... Why?

"Listen to me, Nao—to put it bluntly, the music world's a nest of vagrants, misers and perverts. It's best you don't associate yourself with those people!"

"Those are all referring to you, yeah?"

"I-I am not a pervert! I did create you properly, no!?"

"Ah, enough! Shut up, you vagrant miser!" And also, apologize to all the people in the industry right now! "Wait, why's the envelope already open?"

I snatched the envelope from Tetsurou's hand.

"Well..... in my articles, I always write about how delicious Nao's cooking is, so some office lady—at the prime age of twenty-eight—might've written you a letter of admiration. I have to check."

Consider this me begging you—next time, just give me the damn letter right away.....

I sat on the living room sofa and checked the contents of the envelope. In it, there was only a ticket and a simple invitation card without the name of the sender. I thought it'd be some sort of

classical music event, but instead, it seemed to be a live rock performance. Glancing at the venue of the event, the place didn't seem to be very spacious.

"I thought they sent the letter to you by accident instead of me." Tetsurou stuck his head out above me and said, "But it seems like it's really something for you."

"Uhh, mmm..... But....."

I had no idea who sent it to me. The band performing was a famous band that even I knew, despite my lack of knowledge of J-pop. It was written on the ticket that it was an exclusive concert for their fan club—so why did the company send me something like this?

"Should I call the editor to ask?"

"I asked already. He said a member of that band asked them to deliver it to you."

"Ehh? But I can't think of anyone who would do that."

The only professional pop musicians I knew were Hiroshi and Furukawa, both of whom I had met when we had performed together during the summer. We still occasionally met up at the live house—could it be that someone had come to know me indirectly through them..... No, that's not quite possible, right?

"Whatever, just go and take a look, yeah? Doesn't seem like a prank to me. Just run away if someone throws a job at you."

Tetsurou said that irresponsibly before scooting back to the sound system. I thought to myself, "A typical parent would've said 'This looks really suspicious, so reject the invitation!'" Am I wrong?

However, they were one of the few recent bands in Japan whose live performances were well-received, which sparked an interest in me. And since it's hard to get a ticket to a fan club performance, I guess I'll just take a look? Though it'll be slightly lonely going alone, as I have only one ticket, if having two means I'd have to go through another crazy fight for the ticket..... I'll pass.



I went to Yoyogi that Saturday night. The thought of going to

places like that, late at night by myself, had become less and less intimidating to me since our performance at the live house. Though, honestly, becoming accustomed to something like that was a little frightening.

Located on both sides of the street, were rows of fashion shops, all in decline. As I headed down the street, I spotted a crowd gathering beneath a new building located at the corner. That's probably it? Speaking of which, the small live house isn't done taking in all the people standing at the entrance and around the staircases? Wouldn't that obstruct pedestrians?

There weren't any signboards or anything placed outside, as it wasn't a concert open to the public. I crosschecked the name of the building with the venue written on my ticket, then made my way downstairs to the basement. Upon seeing my ticket, the ticketing lady at the entrance flashed me a slight smile and pinned a blue artificial flower above my chest pocket. What's this? Do all the attendees of this concert need to get one of these pinned on their shirts? But I didn't see anyone else with a flower. I made my way to the end of the stairs in confusion.

I'll never get use to the feeling of pushing open the heavy soundproof doors.

It felt like the air in the live house was electrified. A set of drums was positioned on the jet-black stage in a way that we could only see its faint blue outline. The audience was packed together like a can of sardines, waiting for the performance to start. I still thought I wasn't really suitable for places like these. I grabbed a glass of ginger ale from the bar and sat myself down on a round chair located near the back of the audience seating.

A large number of people behind me began to push me towards the stage, and in the process, increased the thickness of the human wall. Then again, what sort of band is this? Who invited me here, and for what purpose? I hugged my knees half in anticipation, and half in unease.

The lights dimmed—

A loud roar that nearly ripped the hair off my head rang throughout the venue. I saw the silhouettes of a few people on stage, and what



entered my ears next, was the high-pitched feedback of the guitars. I knelt on the chair to get a better view of what was going on on stage.

The spotlights on stage lit up simultaneously, and the cheers exploded right after. My face was then assaulted by a vigorous tempo.

The lead vocalist sang with a high-pitched voice that was loud and clear, but occasionally erupted into a deafening scream. I recalled seeing that person on television or somewhere else before. The band was deserving of its reputation as one of the leading bands of J-pop—the tight, undulating melody created a sense of rhythm that made me unintentionally leave my chair to get a step or two closer to the stage.

The appearances of the band members were all thematically black. Their stylish and intricate costumes were perfect for them, and really made them eye-catching on the stage. Despite that, though, they didn't hold back their words; the lead singer peppered his sentences with lewd words without any hesitation, which I found to be really crass.

"The very first name we thought up for the band was <HoleBrothers>, 'cause all the members had slept with the manager before!"

"Oi, I never heard that before!" replied the bassist. Damn, that feels really atrocious. However, the audience enjoyed that exchange—I guess they can only say this stuff at a nonofficial concert.

In the end, their live performance was pretty impressive, and when it came time for the encore, I was already satisfied to the point that it didn't matter who invited me anymore.

But—

"We have a special guest here today who'll appear on stage as the guitarist! But since our guest shouldn't be in a place like this, we have to keep the person's identity a secret!"

Feels like I've heard that somewhere before? As I was racking my brain trying to search for the answer to that question, the spotlights flashed about randomly for a while, then focused all the lights on the

left side of the stage. A short silhouette appeared.

Seems like a middle school or high school girl—that was my very first impression of the person, just based on appearance. The person was dressed in a black goth lolita outfit, probably to fit the style of the band. The fluffy skirt was incredibly short, and was coupled with a top that revealed the shoulders. In the person's hands was an aged Stratocaster filled with scars. Even though the person's face was shielded behind a veil hanging off the hat, the champagne gold hair looked like it was burning when the spotlights shone their rays on it.....

Damn, wait!

"Julien.....?"

The unexpected costume of the special guest caused the excited crowd to roar into a thunderous frenzy, swallowing my unconscious mumbling. I was sure the person was Julien. But why's Julien here? And why's he crossdressing? Wait, is the person on stage really him?

The drummer lifted his drumsticks in the air and tapped them, counting down from four.

Suddenly, a series of heavy metal beats sounded from the drums, shaking me. And at the same time, the lead vocalist began screaming a series of intensive twisting pitches, as though he were trying to chew away the microphone.

The melody of the main guitar cleaved open the burning chaos, and with the sharpness of lightning, pierced its way into the darkness of the live house—that was Julien. Those slender fingers slid up and down the strings with incredible speed. It seemed as though Julien were plucking the nerves of the audience rather than the strings of the guitar. The result was a series of very distinct timbres. My knees were trembling nonstop, and I could barely keep my body straight.

Till then, I had never really paid any attention to the so-called "death metal rock" genre. The idea of "using the voice as an accompaniment," and giving the guitar the freedom to run crazy with its main melody, was a form of rock I could never imagine. However, that was the sort of music that was surrounding me. And despite being washed about by the torrential music, the sound of Julien's

guitar remained crystal clear to my ears.

There really are times when music can convey the truth better than words.

I knew straight away. It was similar to the timbre that had shaken me back then.

That's right. It was the sound of Mafuyu's guitar.



Upon seeing the artificial flower on my chest, the young and pretty female manager nodded her head and led me to the lounge. I see, so the flower's actually a backstage pass.

"Urm..... You can tell Julien I'm fine with meeting him out here....."

"It's okay, don't worry."

With that said, she pushed me into the room.

Rather than a lounge, it was more like a cramped storeroom—filled with amplifiers, drums and lighting equipment, and refurbished with a few tables and folding chairs. The room reeked of sweat, some metallic smell, and some other messy odor. Julien was still wearing the black leather sleeveless top. He sat in the middle of the four other members, who had already changed out of their concert costumes and into their regular clothes. Somehow, it looks like..... Though it's strange of me to think this, but..... It looked like he was a girl surrounded by four scary, burly men who had stripped her clothes away from her. He looked very out of place.

"Naomi!"

Julien sprang from his chair and ran towards me.

"You are here! That's great!"

Seeing that he was about to hug me tightly again, I shoved his face away. Calm down, French.

"Is he the one Yuri invited?"

"Who is he?"

One by one, the band members walked up next to me. It felt really scary, as every one of them looked incredibly strong.

"Well, he is my precious's precious," said Julien, as he turned his head to face me.

"So that means he's my precious's precious's precious?"

"Then..... that makes him my precious's precious's precious's precious!"

"Since when am I your precious, you homo!?"

"You're a homo as well, no!? Yuri's a guy!"

"Come outside and settle things with me right now!"

"Just what I wanted!"

And with that, the lead vocalist and the guitarist grabbed each other by the collar and made their way to the corridor, staring at each other the whole time. What the hell is going on with this band.....? The drummer, who looked like someone who often worried about others, pushed a chair next to me and urged me to sit down. "Don't mind them, those two are idiots." The problem was, I could faintly hear loud noises and furious roars coming from the corridor—there's no way I can idly chat in a situation like this!

"Sorry, Yuri. You guys better leave for now. It seems they're really duking it out."

The bassist, who was observing the situation in the corridor, said that with a frown.

"I'm sorry, Naomi. Let's go outside."

"Huh? Eh?"

Julien grabbed me by the arm and ran out of the room, through the door linked to the stage. I heard shouts of "I'm gonna kill you!" and "I'm gonna impregnate you!" from behind me.



"I met everyone at the hotel I was staying at during my performance in LA."

Julien sat on the round chair next to me and said that while sipping on his drink from a paper cup. The noise of the crowded McDonald's and the ambient J-pop music sounded quiet in contrast to the earlier

ruckus.

"The vocalist, Gata, barged into my room when he was drunk. He probably just entered the wrong room, I think? And grabbed my violin out of the blue and strummed it as though it were a guitar. I then punched him to the floor in a fit of an anger, but that incident helped us become friends."

I let out a heavy sigh. I had no idea what to think about these people.

The whole situation of me being in such a place felt really unbelievable as well. Something must've gone wrong somewhere for me to end up sitting next to the prodigy violinist—who frequently appeared on the covers of magazines—listening to him spout these stupid stories as I chewed on some fries.

Why did Julien want to meet me? And why did he invite me to see the concert?

"Right, I have a lot of questions to ask you, but first—"

"Mmm, yes?"

"Why are you still crossdressing?"

Before we left the live house, he had gone to the bathroom to change out of his costume. I thought he was going to change into a set of ordinary clothes, so I didn't expect to see him come out of the bathroom in a short-jeans-and-T-shirt combo, the same combo Kagurazaka-senpai usually wore. He was wearing a pair of orange sunglasses, and sporting his golden hair as well. People probably would've believed me if I had told them he was the newest upcoming member of the *Hello! Project*. It felt really embarrassing sitting with him. <sup>[1]</sup>

"Oh..... you mean this? It is safer for me to disguise myself."

I see. I guess he's a famous person after all..... But there should be other ways of doing it, right?

"Don't you have other questions you want to ask?" asked Julien, as he lowered his sunglasses slightly while tilting his head.

I'll probably go crazy if I continue talking to this person here. If I had to describe my feeling at the time, I would say it felt like I had

dropped something without realizing, and had walked a long distance away from it already; but, for some reason, I was still very concerned about what was behind me.

Then again, I do have a lot of questions for him.

And the one I'm most curious about is—

"..... Did you learn the guitar together with Mafuyu?"

"Nope....."

For some reason, Julien said that with pride. He shook his head and continued,

"I am the one who taught Mafuyu how to play. And also, I gave Mafuyu the guitar she is using right now."

I was speechless for a while. I had never considered that that would be the case.

And so..... this guy here is Mafuyu's..... teacher? Is that it?

I suddenly recalled the name that was carved inside Mafuyu's Stratocaster. Oh right. "Yuri" was Julien's nickname back when he was studying at the Moscow Conservatory, so it's probably written in Russian.

Despite the fact that none of us could read the name anyway, Mafuyu was still very intent on hiding it. Does that mean she didn't want anyone else to know about her relationship with Julien.....?

"Mafuyu's relationship with Maestro Ebisawa has always been bad..... and she was frustrated that she could not play the piano. I had gone through a similar phase back when I was a child, and that was why I started learning the guitar in secret. I thought Mafuyu could use the same method to find a place she could escape to."

Julien suddenly shifted his gaze away from me.

"Though Mafuyu still did not manage to find it....." murmured Julien, as he gently swirled the orange juice in the paper cup.

"—It's not a place for her to escape to!"

Julien raised his head in shock. I was surprised by what I said as well.

What I was saying was true though, so I repeated it once more—

"Mafuyu didn't escape to the world of guitars."

"..... Why do you say that?"

Why? Because—it's obvious once you hear it. I knew it instantly, and Ebichiri should've picked up on it when he listened to the recording back then. But I couldn't express it in words.

"So what is your role, Naomi?"

"..... Huh?"

"This is the reason I invited you to the concert—so I could ask you this question. You are a critic, so why are you staying by Mafuyu's side?"

"Don't call me a critic!"

"But Maestro Ebisawa showed me the articles you wrote!"

That was unnecessary, Ebichiri.....

"Your articles are critiques through and through."

"Thanks for the praise." Though he's probably not praising me.

"Not only do you look down on us, you group our work into different categories, and list what is good and bad about them just so you can earn money. How can someone like you stay by Mafuyu's side?"

"Hold on....." What are critics to you? And my articles weren't really well written, you know? "Look, why do you care?"

"Because Mafuyu is my precious!"

Julien said that emphatically, as he looked at me with a faint smile at the corners of his lips.

His..... precious.

So the two of you are indeed a couple, huh? Both of them were used to being the topics of conversations because they were both prodigies. Both of them had experienced the same excruciating and burning pain brought about by their loneliness on the stage. And if the two of them had met each other in America under those circumstances—

All I had to do was ask. But for some unknown reason, I couldn't bring myself to do it. Instead, Julien was the one that asked me the

question that lay hidden in my heart.

"Naomi, what is your relationship with Mafuyu?"

Julien's question pierced straight into my heart.

What's the relationship..... between Mafuyu and me? I had never thought about that before. We met each other by chance, then ran away together, and sought our dreams together. And before I realized, Mafuyu was already by my side. I can't really explain, even if you ask.....

Julien tilted his head slightly.

"Is it such a difficult question to answer?"

"..... It is."

"You cannot say you two are just companions in the same band! Because I have heard that from Mafuyu already."

"Uhh....."

I rolled the hamburger wrapper into a ball. I couldn't come up with anything.

"You cannot answer me even though you are someone who earns money by weaving lies?"

Julien said that straightforwardly with an angelic smile on his face. Well, if we wanted to nitpick about details, I'm not actually a critic, just a high school student that has written a few articles to earn some pocket money. I wouldn't even get angry if someone belittled critics. Moreover, the only music critic I knew was someone who was actually much more useless than Julien could have possibly ever imagined.

So all I did to answer him was nod my head silently. Just go ahead and look down on me if you want.

However, Julien suddenly looked at me with tears in his eyes and said,

"..... I am actually filled with regret."

What do you regret?

"I really want to create and record lots and lots of music with Mafuyu. I wish I could go on tour with her forever in America and



Europe. However, I am not by Mafuyu's side when she is in the most pain. The one she needs is not me."

Julien's gaze floated towards an empty space in the air. It seemed as though he was looking past the ocean, towards the gloomy faraway skies of North America. His feeble voice was just like the sound of an angel spreading its wings as though it were about to vanish into the air. I was reminded of the ending of Alban Berg's Violin Concerto.

"Mafuyu's timbre is really, really special, but I cannot protect her. But I don't get it. Why? Why can you do it?"

Julien suddenly grabbed me by the wrists and moved his face close to mine.

"Why can Naomi play the bass by Mafuyu's side....."

His slender and fair hand landed weakly on the table with a \*pa\*. His long eyelashes slowly dropped downwards. He then lowered his head and didn't say a single word. I thought to myself..... "Is he crying?"

I finally understood what was going on in Julien's head.

I was in a position that was supposed to be his. The melody of the violin concerto appeared clearly in my mind all of a sudden. If Mafuyu and Julien hadn't been hurt by music, they would have recorded those pieces a long time ago.....

A dream that didn't manage to get past the ocean; that, instead, was swallowed up by the waves.

"I'm sorry....."

Julien lifted his head and showed an embarrassed smile.

"Nothing can be done about it even if I say such words to you, right?"

Because you are nothing more than a critic—it somehow felt like Julien was going to continue on with that. But that was just my imagination, stemming from my sense of inferiority.

"Has Maestro Ebisawa told you already? It seems Mafuyu is playing the piano again."

"Eh....."

That took me by surprise, and caused me to nearly forget everything Julien had said up till then. Mafuyu's playing the piano again? Seriously? I did remember talking about it a little after the concert, but..... are her fingers really okay?

"She is slowly recovering. Thanks to the rehabilitation therapy, she is able to practice on the piano almost every day."

"B-But she....." Mafuyu didn't tell me anything about it. Why? She told me some time ago, that her fingers were immobile because of psychological issues. And she was still unable to use both her hands when she played the piano during the chorus contest. So that means something happened after that? Something happened to result in this turn of events?

I stared at the young boy in front of me—the boy who was so unbelievably pretty.

Is it because—she saw Julien?

"And so, we have decided to record a new album."

I was speechless.

Not only is she playing the piano once more, but she's actually returning to the music industry? She's returning to the world that had harmed her so brutally?

"The plan for her comeback is to perform a duet with me. Mafuyu has already agreed to it as well."

"Together with you.....?"

I see—so that's how it is.

Ebichiri once said that Mafuyu's fingers might recover if she could find the will to pick up the piano again. The reason Mafuyu has taken up the piano again—is it because she has reunited with Julien once more?

"That is why..... I am really frustrated about it."

Julien mumbled. I stared at him and asked,

"..... Why? Isn't it your wish to play the violin with Mafuyu again? And in addition, she'll be performing with you....."

He put on a faint smile.

"That is the reason I am feeling so frustrated! You would not understand, Naomi."

That lonely smile of his looked just like a painting that gave off the illusion of a frozen time.



"Thank you. I had fun today."

Once we were outside the McDonald's, Julien thanked me with a brilliant smile on his face. That's his sincere feeling, and not something he just said out of courtesy, right?

"And also..... I have said things to Naomi that are extremely mean, have I not?"

I jumped in shock and froze on the busy street leading to the train station. I felt someone bump into my back.

"So you actually realized that.....?"

"Mmm. But..... I do not think I have done anything wrong to you, so I will not be apologizing."

With that said, Julien stretched his hand out towards me, but I ignored it. It was a little childish, but I couldn't help it. I was just a high school student, so there wasn't any way I wouldn't have been angry after hearing the things he said.

"There is still no way I can allow Naomi to be by Mafuyu's side."

"You know..... it's pointless telling me that....."

"I will not allow it! How can someone as dense as you be by her side?"

"Urm....."

"I can say how much I love Mafuyu a hundred times, or play a hundred songs to show my feelings for her. But what about you?"

"Wait..... even if you put it that way....."

"Will you listen to me if I ask you to leave Mafuyu's side?"

Why are you steering the conversation in that direction!? Please spare me that already!

"..... Well..... Mafuyu's the guitarist of our band, and there's no one else besides her that can play with a timbre like hers."

"I can!"

I was rendered speechless by that straightforward statement from Julien.

"I am better than her in terms of guitar technique as well. You heard me play just now, right?"

"Uhh..... yeah."

He was right. The timbre of Julien's guitar did sound similar to that of Mafuyu's before she had joined the Folk Music Research Club—the same timbre that I had disliked back when she had claimed the practice room for herself. However, his tone was much more polished in comparison.

Therefore, despite my dislike towards Julien, I had no choice but to agree that his guitar technique was indeed a level above Mafuyu's.

"Hey, will you give up on Mafuyu if I say I am willing to play the guitar for you?"

"What are you thinking..... And you don't have the spare time to do that anyway, right?"

"That is nothing if it will make you stay away from Mafuyu."

I was dumbfounded, and stood motionlessly in the middle of the sidewalk. The pedestrian behind me knocked my shoulder, nearly causing me to fall. Is he serious?

"That's what it is like when you truly fall in love with someone."

Really..... so that's how it is when you fall in love with somebody?

"I will be by Naomi's side in place of Mafuyu. How's that?"

Julien grabbed my wrists tightly as he said that. I was confused by him.

"Urm..... that's impossible." In many different respects.

"So that means you are unwilling to let Mafuyu go?"

What's with the "so that means"..... Julien had a wide smile on his face—obvious proof that he had misunderstood my words. Well, it wasn't like I had any strength left in me to correct him.

"You are a critic, no? So why do you not speak up when it is time for you to do so?"

Damn that bastard. Whatever. Just say whatever you want.

"Mmm. I get it. Well then, goodbye, my enemy."

Julien deliberately tilted his body to the side in a cute manner and waved his hand.

"Thank you for listening to our performance today. We will be performing a few more times in Japan, so can I send you the tickets? I do wish to see you again."

I nodded with a stiff expression on my face.

His guitar and personal belongings were still at the live house, so Julien turned around and walked in the opposite direction of the station. That small and undependable back of his gradually blended in with the pedestrians beneath the streetlights, then disappeared from my sight.

I sat on a road barrier by the side of the road and sighed. That was really tiring.

Honestly speaking, he was a really inconceivable person. During our conversation, the anger inside me did come close to bursting, but instead of being angry at Julien, I was more angry at myself, because I was a worthless person that couldn't refute his words.

But he said he still wished to see me.

Actually, it wasn't like I really disliked him, and if I could, I did wish to see him again. But I was just schooled really hard by him just now, so how should I face him the next time we meet?



When I returned home, I found Tetsurou lying on the sofa with his legs resting against the back of the sofa in the shape of a "V." He was opening and closing them to the rhythm of [Radetzky March](#). Upon seeing me, he said to me weakly, "Nao, I'm hungry." I remember telling you that I'd be late today and that you should figure out your own dinner.....

But I already knew something like this was going to happen, so I

tossed him the paper bag I brought home from McDonald's.

"..... This is my dinner?"

"Yeah. I bought it from Yoyogi, so it's really good." Though it tastes the same all over the country.

There's probably nothing in the world more pathetic than a middle-aged man, with a freelance job, stuffing cold fries in his mouth while tears slide down his face. Even I felt like crying when I saw that. Tetsurou stuffed the food in his mouth like a squirrel and mumbled,

"I worked hard for sixteen years, and put in an endless amount of love, to raise Nao to be the person he is today..... Tell me, Misako, where have I gone wrong....."

"It probably started with marriage—that's what Misako said."

I met with my mother about once a month for lunch; and most of the time, half our conversation would just be us badmouthing Tetsurou.

"It's not like I could do anything!"

Tetsurou suddenly threw a tantrum and flung the bag of fries to the floor.

"I can't earn much through just writing critiques! I was poor, and Misako was nagging me after she started her own career, so I had no choice but to marry her!"

Why are you angry all of a sudden? That marriage did last for eight years, okay? And also, what do you mean you can't earn much as a critic? You can afford a house, and it's not like you can't afford to eat decently or anything. I think you should apologize to the people that are actually slogging away at work!

"Fu fu. Well, I earned that cash outside of what I normally got paid for my critiques! To put it nicely, I am the industry's ruffian."

"That's not even nice to begin with!" And to put it badly, you're a criminal, okay? "Look—"

I was about to say something, but I swallowed my words right away. Is it okay to ask Tetsurou this? And will he answer me seriously if I ask?

The problem was, I had no one else to talk about it with.

"—Tetsurou, why would someone want to become a critic?"

Tetsurou blinked and stared long and hard at me, then washed down the fries in his mouth with a glass of whiskey.

"What's wrong? Why are you suddenly asking me this?"

"Someone asked me that question, and I couldn't come up with an answer."

"Misako asked me the same question before, but that was a long time ago."

Tetsurou finished his glass of whiskey in two gulps.

"And what was your answer?"

"Hmm? Oh."

Tetsurou's gaze dropped to the floor—

"I'll tell you this. Ultimately, the reason everyone does their job, is so that "they can make someone else happy." If you can't make someone other than yourself happy, you won't be able to earn any money. Am I right?"

"..... Mmm."

"But even after I graduated from the university, I still had no idea how to make someone happy. And since I had studied music history, I figured the only job that was left for me was becoming a teacher. But I had no intention of teaching other people's children, so I asked my professor, in a really honest manner, 'How can I make others happy?' His reply was, 'The only talent you have is fooling others, so work hard in that direction, Hikawa.' I was then suddenly hit by inspiration: if I wrote articles with the intention of fooling my readers, those who weren't fooled by me would feel some happiness when thinking about those who were. I'd be able to earn money from that, no?"

I was dumbfounded. I unconsciously interrupted him.

"You said these things to Misako as well?"

"Mmm. It was those words that made Misako think, 'This guy is hopeless. He won't be able to live on his own.' And she did tell me once, that it was those words that made her realize we had no other option but to get married."

"And if I ever feel like there's no other option but to leave this house, it would also be because I had heard those words from you....."

"Nao, that won't do..... You're voicing your inner monologue."

Ah, it's true..... And even though it was something I had only thought of a second ago, I couldn't help but think it again.

I long knew that I had asked the wrong person. I can't complain a single bit if Tetsurou's beaten to death by Julien and Mafuyu.



It was a new week yet again, and an incredibly rare thing happened when I entered the classroom on Monday—Mafuyu actually came to talk to me.

"I heard you and Yuri met each other."

"E-Eh? Y-Yeah, that's right..... But how did you know?"

"Well....."

Mafuyu's gaze wandered about. She seemed to be hiding something. Our classmates gathered around us out of curiosity.

"Ahh, right. I remember him saying he'd be staying in Mafuyu's home for a while?"

"Eh, ah, well..... he decided not to, so he is staying at a hotel for now." For some unknown reason, Mafuyu was flustered when she said that to me. "I-It's true! But..... we meet up sometimes for some other reasons."

The reason Mafuyu met up with Julien..... Ah, I got it. Julien said there were plans for him to release an album together with Mafuyu. She should be referring to that, right?

"Urm, well..... are the two of you practicing together?" I tried asking her. Mafuyu's face turned red all of a sudden.

"Y-You knew about that as well?"

"Eh? Mmm, yeah. You should've told me your fingers had healed —"

"S-Stop talking about that! Enough! I-I am the one asking the



questions right now!" Mafuyu slammed her desk. Those around us were shocked by her sudden action. Even her ears were turning red.

"Why did you meet Julien? D-Did both of you have something important to do?"

"Urm, well....."

I had no idea how to reply to that. Or rather, I wasn't in the mood to do so. It seems everything Julien had said was true. Mafuyu had the will to pick up the piano again—and for commercial purposes as well.

I had never noticed her fingers had already recovered to the point that she could practice with someone else.

No wait, isn't this something to celebrate? It's been a long-running wish of mine to hear Mafuyu play the piano again. But why can't I say anything when Mafuyu's staring at me, asking me about what happened between Julien and me?

"Give me a proper answer, Naomi."

Mafuyu suddenly moved her face close to mine, causing me to push my chair back in surprise; my heart was beating wildly. The chair tripped over something, and I nearly fell on my back.

"The couple's quarreling again?" "They're quarreling." "Looks like our dear Princess is serious this time." "Just die already, Nao!"

I had no time to listen to what my classmates were whispering.

"Was Yuri the one who invited you? Or—"

"Eh? Ah, yeah."

After taking some time to regulate my breathing, I sat back down on my chair and tried to convert my thoughts into words.

"A few days ago, I received a ticket to a live house from some unknown person. I had no idea who the sender was, and it was only when I watched the concert that I figured out....."

"You heard Yuri's guitar?"

"Mmm." I hesitated on whether or not I should tell her, but I ended up telling her anyway. "The timbre of his guitar is similar to yours. It's just like..... the timbre of your guitar before you had joined the Folk

Music Research Club."

An awkward expression appeared on Mafuyu's face. She crossed her arms in front of her chest and turned her face away with a "Hmph."

"And then he told me lots of things..... like how you learned guitar from him..... and you playing the piano and stuff....."

"..... What else?"

"Urm....." I think the rest of the things are too dangerous to say.

"Things you cannot say?"

Don't put it like that! Everyone will misunderstand us! See? The guys are all getting excited for some unknown reason!

Just then, Chiaki pulled the door open hard and yelled "Good morning!" as she stepped into the classroom. I had never been as thankful of her presence as I was just then.

"Oho, what's going on? Are you two busy with something?"

Chiaki squeezed herself between Mafuyu and me (though she wouldn't have been able to have gotten to her seat if she didn't). The bell rang right after that. Thank god, I'm saved.



"Hmmm..... Even after being schooled that hard by him, all you did was head home in a listless state without even striking back? That's pathetic. You know, I thought I had already fixed that born-loser personality of yours, young man."

It was after school, and we were in the Folk Music Research Club's practice room. Senpai was sitting on the round chair with her legs crossed; and for some unknown reason, I was forced to sit in seiza before Senpai to explain to her what had happened on that Saturday. Chiaki and Mafuyu were sitting to the side and listening as well. Why? Why am I spilling everything? I didn't mention anything about Mafuyu, but I did tell them everything about how Julien had verbally assaulted me.

"Let's forget the stuff about the critics, or young man being a born loser, or other things like that for now. There's something I can never

forgive you for!"

"..... What?"

"Why didn't you take some pictures of him when he was crossdressing?"

"Who gives a damn about that!?"

I can't possibly cater to each and every desire of yours!

"Dressing up in goth loli sounds pretty good! Senpai, let's all wear goth loli costumes for the school festival!"

And so, Chiaki started talking about some insignificant stuff.

"I see. We can make young man crossdress as well! That's something I had never thought of before!"

"And Nao's real name is pretty feminine too!"

Wait a second..... what are you girls talking about now? I was about to stand up to tsukkomi them, but I suddenly noticed Mafuyu sitting unhappily in the corner, not saying anything. She quickly turned her gaze away when she noticed mine.

Just like how Mafuyu was curious about what Julien and I had talked about, I was curious about what she had heard from him as well. Moreover, I had no clue what that person would say to her.

"Hey..... what did he say about me?"

I couldn't help but ask. However, Mafuyu turned her head away and began tuning her guitar. Weird. Did I make her angry again? How?

"But isn't Nao at least a little bit irritated with him? He said such harsh things about you and your dad's occupation. You should've vented your anger saying "Don't you dare look down on us critics!" or something like that!"

Chiaki suddenly went back on topic.

"You're still my pride, even if you didn't do that, young man! Do you still remember? I managed to find you just by following the brilliance of your articles in the vast sea of words!"

Senpai went back to reproving me as well. All I could do was shrink my neck.

"Hey critic. The name of Hikawa Naomi is already tarnished. Are you still planning to remain silent despite that?"

"But I'm not a critic....."

"But you are a critic, no? That was what you told me....." Mafuyu murmured. "You are only good at coming up with all sorts of weird and twisted reasonings, and yet, you were rendered speechless by Yuri's words."

"E-Eh? When did I say that?"

Mafuyu stood up all of a sudden.

"Y-You forgot!?"

Her face turned red in an instant. I raised my arms to shield my face unconsciously. Don't hold your guitar with a reverse grip—it's really scary! I told her before that I was a critic? When was that? When did I say such a thing to her?

"It was back when..... I was here by myself—"

Mafuyu noticed Chiaki and Senpai staring at her as she said those words with a grimace. Her gaze fell to the floor. She then leaned her guitar against the wall and walked past me out of the room.

The two of them immediately directed their cold gazes at me. Chiaki looked at me with teary eyes filled with reproach, while Senpai looked at me with mocking laughter in her eyes, as she watched what was going on.

What did she mean by "*Y-You forgot!?*" I can't remember. Back when she was here alone—that means it's something not known to both Senpai and Chiaki. Was it something that happened when we staked the ownership of this room on our showdown?

"..... Ah."

I turned my head to look at the soundproof door that had already shut. Mafuyu was no longer in sight, so I rushed out of the room. I remember now! Damn it, how could I have forgotten that!?

Even though it was something I said.

I caught up to her—with the maroon-colored hair on her back—at the corner of the staircase.

"W-Wait, Mafuyu! I'm sorry, I remember. I'm really sorry!"

Mafuyu's long hair trembled. She stopped next to the wall, but didn't turn around to face me. It was just like how it was back in May—there wasn't enough time for us to talk, so we had no idea what the other was thinking.

Back then, I had accidentally talked about how Mafuyu was harshly criticized by the critics in America, causing her to run out of the room in a fit of anger. And just like now, I had rushed out of the room to chase her to apologize to her profusely. When I found her back then, she told me, *"There is no reason for you to apologize,"* to which I replied—

*"I'm a critic too..... That's why, I should be qualified to apologize to you, right?"*

Even though I was the one that had said those words.

Mafuyu pressed her hand against the wall and slowly turned her head around. There was still a hint of anger in her eyes, but its intensity had been significantly diminished, due to the embarrassed expression on her face.

"..... You have to take responsibility for what you said."

"I'm already reflecting on it....."

But..... why is she so angry? Are the ramblings of a half-assed critic really that important to her?

"T-That's not it!"

Mafuyu hammered my chest with her tightly clenched fists. At that moment, I thought to myself, "Whoa, so it's true!" Mafuyu really could clench her right hand tightly into a fist. I was so happy I wanted to wrap both my hands around her fists. However, I couldn't move because of the pain in my chest that resulted from her hammering.

"Y-You went back home meekly, without making a single rebuttal, despite the harsh dressing down Yuri gave you. Isn't that right?"

"Yeah....."

"Yuri..... He wants me to g-give up on you....." Mafuyu couldn't continue her sentence. Instead, she began to hammer my chest

again. Just what exactly did that guy say to Mafuyu? Mafuyu shook her head vigorously. She had no intention of continuing on from there.

"Despite the fact that there is nothing else you can beat Yuri at, other than critiquing, you let him look down on you in that area as well. And then you ran away from him when you could not beat him in a war of words!"

Those were some really harsh words..... but Mafuyu was spot on. "Well, my bad, but..... even if I had lost to him in a war of words, why are you so frustrated about it?"

"Of course I would be frustrated! You have to pull yourself back together, because you are my—"

..... I am Mafuyu's...?

She swallowed her words again.

It can't be, right? I mean—if Julien had told her about how he wanted me to give up on Mafuyu—b-but..... Wait, that's not possible, right? If that really is the case—

I sighed in confusion.

But Mafuyu was right. I was really useless on Saturday. Even though the critiques were forced onto me by Tetsurou, I still approached the job very seriously—typing away at the keyboard, I would always ponder on how I should go about writing the article to best allow my words to touch the readers.

But even so, I couldn't come up with a rebuttal against Julien.

Using his cute and innocent face and words, it was as though that person was asserting "A useless person like you has no right to stay by Mafuyu's side."

I clenched my fists unconsciously.

"Mafuyu, can you contact Julien?"

Despite her slightly uneasy expression, Mafuyu nodded her head.

Then I'll give it a try! As a person whose only talent is wordplay, and as someone who has spent more than half his life listening to music created by others, the one thing I can do is—

I'll show that innocent and almost miracle-like violinist what I'm

made of.



Bright was the venue of our band's very first live performance. The live house was located in a nearby town that I could bike to in about an hour. It was located in a quiet residential district some distance away from the station, but its name was well-known among the insiders; and with each passing day, the number of customers increased.

It's the same today as well. When I reached the live house, there was already a huge crowd gathered around the entrance of the staircase leading to the basement of the building. Often, amateur bands would pool their money together to share the stage, allocating how much time each band had to perform after covering the rental fee for the whole day. Because of this, customers would always kill time outside, waiting till it was time for their favorite band to play before going in (but personally, I felt it was always better to listen to all the performances, as the entrance fee was the same regardless).

But an event called "Club Bright" was actually being held that day. The live house had invited many disco musicians down for the event, and had been playing dance music nonstop, which was why hip-hop clothes—which I didn't usually wear—dominated the fashion scene at the venue. Amid the dreadlocks and baggy pants, I noticed the eye-catching figure of a short person, and quickly made my way towards him.

"Naomi!"

Julien's face lit up in an instant. He pushed away the guys around him that were trying to strike up a conversation with him.

"Sorry, the person I am waiting for is here." He apologized as he ran towards me. I couldn't help but press my hand against my forehead as I sighed.

"Look, why are you crossdressing again.....?"

Julien was wearing a cream-colored short, ruffled blouse, paired with a skirt, and had even dolled himself up with hairpins and earrings. No wonder the guys were hitting on him.

"I already told you before. It is a disguise."

Please don't twirl around and pose in your clothes when you're saying that.

"Sorry for making you wait. Did you have a hard time getting here?"

"Not at all. I had someone drive me here." Julien answered me with a smile.

"You're probably pretty busy, so thanks for coming."

The live house didn't organize disco parties very often, so I was lucky Julien had time to spare to make it down here. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to accept my invitation.

"I never thought Naomi would invite me to an event. I am really happy."

"No, well..... Actually, I'm here to have my revenge."

I mumbled, as I passed a ticket to Julien. I then started making my way down the stairs.

"Revenge?"

Despite how narrow the flight of stairs was, Julien insisted on walking by my side.

"Mmm, because I was schooled hard by you a few days ago."

"Uhh..... And that means you will be bringing me to a dark basement where I will be left at your mercy?"

"That'll never happen!"

I really wished he would word his sentences in a nicer manner.

After opening the heavy soundproof doors, we squeezed into the hot atmosphere filled with rhythmic beats. The cocktail lights danced all around us; and under the guidance of the dim lights, we could faintly see the outlines of the stage. In place of the drum set stood a mixing console. And what came to our attention next, was a rapper rapping in a coarse voice.

"Waa. This is my first time listening to disco."

Julien whispered into my ears, but I still couldn't hear him very clearly. The men and women had all exposed their skin to the heated



atmosphere, and were dancing wildly in the darkness that obscured the bottom half of our sight.

"Nao, you brought another girl here?"

I turned around and saw a fat middle-aged man with a bandanna. The Bright's staff T-shirt on his body was close to bursting apart, thanks to his whale belly.

"G-Good evening."

He was in charge of the audio equipment. After coming here a few times, I gradually became close to him. As he stared at Julien, he bluntly said,

"What's this? You've changed girls again? There's gotta be a limit to this..... You've already made so many girls cry. When are you planning to stop?"

"It's not like that. You see....."

I was really close to blurting out "This person here's a guy," while Julien looked at me with great interest.

"So you made someone else other than me cry?"

"When did I make you cry!?"

"It'll be a while before it's Tomo's turn on stage. You requested him to do something for you, right? What do you have up your sleeves again? Whatever. I'll be looking forward to it."

"Ah, t-thanks."

The middle-aged man dragged his colossal body towards the bar. Oh right, for the event, the DJs will mix their own music when they perform. That's why he's so free.

"Who is this 'Tomo' guy he was talking about?" Julien shouted in my ears. We wouldn't have been able to hear each other if we didn't do that.

"He's a DJ I met here recently. He'll be up next soon."

"So you are planning to show me his stuff?"

I nodded. Tomo was one of Kagurazaka-senpai's old friends. We had only known each other for about two months, but he still accepted my unreasonable request. What a great help he is.

I'll be teaching Julien a really good lesson with this.

As we grabbed our drinks and sat ourselves down at the table, the emcee began rattling on about some things, but I couldn't hear him. The audience gathered beneath the stage and burst into cheers. The spotlights flashed about wildly, then suddenly, a tanned guy wearing a slanted cap appeared on stage. He was sitting behind the mixing console—that's Tomo.

I waved my hands at Tomo, but he probably didn't see me, as he was focusing his attention on the turntables in front of him.

A 6/8 beat tempo began its course. The rapper mumbled a series of murmurs in sextuplets into the microphone, and that monotonous harmony continued on for quite some time. I shot a glance to my side to look at Julien's face—he was slowly leaning towards the stage, and his eyes were fixed on the performance. After a lengthy series of beats that sounded like they were repeating on and on, Tomo began mixing in the beats of the timpani. Next, he slipped in the pizzicato of the bass stringed instruments. It was exactly what I expected from him. I was in full admiration of Tomo's arrangements.

And then—

Amid the clear monophony of the piano, the ear-piercing rhythm of the electronic drums began to overflow from beneath. I knew Julien would be surprised breathless by the clear piano monophony. He should have noticed it. Not only was it the rondo from the third movement of Beethoven's Piano Concert No. 5—[\*\*<Emperor Concerto>\*\*](#)—it was actually played by Mafuyu.

Julien looked at me with glittering eyes. I shook my head silently and pointed at the stage. That wasn't the only surprise I had in store for him—my retaliation had only just begun. In the last bar of the piano's main rondo theme, the glamorous melody of the violin suddenly came barging in on the off-beats. Julien stood up from his chair and nearly let out a cry. I don't think there's anyone else in this world that knows this melody better than he does.

"That's my—"

Julien's weak murmurs were swallowed up by the gradually increasing volume of the orchestra. That was the rondo of the third movement of Beethoven's [\*\*<Violin Concerto in D major>\*\*](#), and the

person playing the solo was none other than Julien himself. I could clearly see the fingers on his left hand fumbling in confirmation, trying to grab tightly to his beloved instrument that wasn't there. After a brief sampling of Mafuyu's piano and Julien's violin, the two instruments began to weave to and fro in the tempo of the disco beats. At times, they would chase after each other; and at other times, they would overlap. The two melodies galloped in the live house filled with darkness, rays of lights and a heated atmosphere.

In my mind, Mafuyu was right next to me. Actually, I had never thought of helping Julien fulfill his unrealized dream; all I had thought was "I'll have to teach him a good lesson in music, just like I did for Mafuyu." But at that very moment, the sound of Julien and Mafuyu surrounded us, and I could see something shiny glittering in the corners of Julien's eyes.

He was the only one that could make Mafuyu pick up the piano again.

That made me feel really frustrated. Yes, I am frustrated. It was my heartfelt wish to listen to Mafuyu play the piano again, but all I could do was convert those feelings of mine into twisted words. That's the only thing I can do, even though I was by her side all this time. However, Julien's right here—the person who has tasted the same loneliness and glamour Mafuyu has. I actually helped him touch the thing buried deep in Mafuyu's heart—and that made me feel really bitter inside.

What the heck am I doing? I intended to use this piece to teach Julien a lesson, but I was the one who was taught a lesson instead. What an idiot I am.

Still, everything was perfect to the point that it could evoke tears from its audience—from the two Beethoven pieces played by Mafuyu and Julien, to Tomo's mixing. So even after the rondo had become engulfed by the familiar-sounding disco music, there was a period of time when I couldn't bring myself to look in Julien's direction. I had no idea what he was saying to me, despite hearing his emotional speech.



After Tomo's performance was over, it was time for a break, so some relaxing music started playing over the speakers.

"Hey you guys, why do both of you look so restless? You're not enjoying yourselves properly!"

When Tomo saw Julien and I laying our heads on the table, he put on an irritated expression and walked towards us with a bottle of whiskey in one of his hands.

"No, it is because the music was just too incredible. Just listening to it drained a lot out of me," replied Julien.

"Ahahaha. We're only halfway into the event! There'll be four more people going up on stage, so you two better listen to everything, yeah? Hey Nao, how was it? This was what you requested, yeah? Geez, you suddenly came to me with that record a week ago and asked me to mix it for you. The tune was off by half a key, and the rhythm was unstable too. Think about how hard it was for me."

"Yeah..... I'm really grateful. Your work greatly exceeded my expectations."

I remained lying on the table as I said that. Tomo kicked my thighs a few times in response.

"Why are you so lacking in your youthfulness despite being a high school student? Since you've brought your girlfriend here, go dance with her or something!"

"Nah, this person's a guy. Also, he played one of the pieces of music I lent you."

Tomo's mouth dropped open, and he remained motionless for quite a while. Julien got up quickly and said,

"I never thought my concerto could become something like that! It was amazing!"

He grabbed Tomo's hand and swung it up and down.

"Eh, ah, yeah....."

Tomo shrunk his body and was about to escape.

"Why are you running away? Did I do something—"

"No..... but you're not angry?"

"Angry? Why?"

"You're a classical musician, no? Aren't you angry that I messed with your record in that manner?"

"Why would I? It was a great performance! There is no reason for me to be angry."

Tomo forcefully swallowed the words he was about to say. I sort of understood his feelings. Still, the veteran DJ was put in a state of embarrassment, due to Julien's innocent and destructive smile.

Julien wanted to ask him more things about DJing, so Tomo sat down with us to chat.

"My room's only six-tatami wide, and the floor has been nearly destroyed by the weight of my records. I spend nearly all my wages on records as well. Whenever I have time to spare, I listen to my records or surf the internet to look for material I can use for my music. However, only a small portion of those records are usable for my performances. Probably ninety out of a hundred records are unusable on stage, and for those that can be used, I usually only sample a few seconds of the whole thing. How should I put it? There are times when I feel really apologetic towards the creators of all this music and all these sounds."

"So my music was one of the usable records out of the hundred?"

Julien looked at Tomo's face ecstatically.

"..... But I messed it up really badly, yeah? I snipped out a few parts, put them on repeat, and cranked up the tempo. Also, while the original piece was really long, the parts I ended up using totaled no more than thirty seconds."

"That's okay," Julien placed his hands on Tomo's as he replied. Tomo was visibly at a loss at what to do. Damn, that French is overly liberal with the skinship!

Tomo's stiff expression was melted away by Julien's following statement:

"Because I can sense the respect in your music!"

"Y-Yeah....."

"I knew right away when I heard it. The reason you used my music

was because you really liked my violin, right?"

Tomo turned his head away in embarrassment and emptied the whiskey bottle in a single gulp. Anyone would do the same in his shoes.....

Tomo stood up. He said he'd be going up on stage to perform again, and he hoped we could continue to listen to his performance.

"I'll be playing Jimi Hendrix for my next performance. Oh yeah, I'm using that worn-out synthesizer you're so envious of. If it's not broken by the end of the performance, I'm planning to give it to Kyouko. You can then borrow it from her to play around with it."

"Eh!? For real!?"

Tomo's synthesizer was an older model, and was already very worn-out. But he had amassed a huge collection of sound effects in it, and since he kept talking about replacing it..... I had secretly wondered if he would be willing to give it to me.

"See you later!"

Julien waved his hands as he sent Tomo off.

The slow-tempo music was still playing. Great, looks like we can chat a while longer. Julien sat down in the chair beside me and sighed at his ignorance.

"I never knew that there was music like this."

That's right. The world is huge. Streams of music had flowed throughout the whole continent before gathering here, in this very place.

"Naomi, is this why you brought me here? So I could listen to this music?"

"Mmm."

Julien seemed a little surprised. Actually, that wasn't the only reason I had invited him here. I relieved my parched throat with the Oolong tea, whose ice had almost completely melted away.

"..... That's not all though. This is also my revenge for the previous time we met."

"Revenge?"

"Yeah. A rebuttal from the untalented critic, in response to the prodigy violinist."

I could finally look straight into Julien's eyes—eyes that were glittering in anticipation and curiosity. Well then, how should I start? I took a deep breath and let it all out.



I jumped straight to the point.

"In my view, critics are somewhat like DJs."



Julien was shaken a little by my words. I took another deep breath before continuing.

"A composer composes a song, and the performers convey it to the audience. On the other hand, a DJ snips, connects, rearranges and overlaps the original piece, to create a completely different product. You never knew such music existed before today, right? The role of the critic is essentially the same."

I looked at my opened palms.

"The critic belongs to the group of literary professions. Ultimately speaking, even if a critic were to put up a front as a scholar, he is still just someone who writes something for readers to read; he makes readers happy, and, at the same time, earns some cash from it. We—"

I was still a little hesitant about lumping myself in with other music critics, as I hadn't written anything impressive yet. But I continued on with what I wanted to say—

"With the pieces composed by different composers as the bases of our articles, we snip, connect, and rearrange the pieces. Then, we add in our own praises and criticisms, to produce an interesting article for the readers. This is probably an area of music that Julien doesn't understand, yeah? However, it's important that you do understand that we wouldn't be able to write anything if we didn't respect our materials."

I looked at Julien's face again. He returned my gaze with a confused expression in his eyes.

Did he understand what I just said?

"At the very least, that's something that applies to me. There might be some bastards out there that hold no respect for the pieces they critique, treating them like records they can crush under their feet. And I do agree with you there, that it'd be best if those critics just disappeared off the face of the world. But reading through an article, you can easily tell whether or not the critic respects the piece he's criticizing. You may think that lies are cheap, and that we can weave as many lies as we want, but that's not the case at all."

My words ended abruptly.

He should understand now, right? Do our words really possess that sort of power? If Julien internalized everything I just said as just a bunch of lies, I might actually punch him in the face.

"—I know that."

Julien said that all of a sudden.

I lifted my head. Julien narrowed his eyes as if there were a backdrop of bright lights behind me.

"I know Naomi is not lying to me."

He gently placed his hands on my fists, which I had unintentionally clenched.

"Because you have put so much effort into replying to the words I had said in jest. I am actually really nervous right now. I cannot look at you directly because of how guilty I feel."

But you've been looking at me this whole time.

"What should I do? I must have said some really mean things to you, right? And I said I would never apologize..... What should I do? What must I do for you to forgive me?"

"Urm, well....." I pushed Julien's icy hands away. "It's fine. I didn't do all this to hear an apology from you. Also, it's not like I'm angry or anything. Just....."

I couldn't remain silent because of how bitter I was. After much provocation from Mafuyu, I had finally managed to get the flame going—the tiny and insignificant pride that resided in my heart.

Therefore, it was okay as long as I could convey my words to Julien.

No, actually, that's not what I'm really concerned about—

Perhaps..... I just wanted to listen to that piece of music.

I wanted to listen to Julien and Mafuyu play together.

I felt strangely uneasy when I imagined them actually playing together, but the music of Beethoven—that had resulted from Mafuyu's and Julien's performances resonating together—still reverberated in my ears.

The atmosphere of the live house heated up all of a sudden, and

the music became fast-paced again. The rapid talking of the emcee picked up speed, and I saw someone with a baseball cap standing beneath the crisscrossing spotlights—it was Tomo. Not only was he DJing, he was actually smashing the keyboard with his fists. From the endless beats of the cadence, came the roar of a jet engine, the sound of a downpour and the wail of an incendiary. Purple lights shone throughout the basement, causing the place to be lit in a sea of fire. Julien occasionally let out a shriek, and even shielded his face with his arms. Tomo actually managed to replicate such realistic sounds of the battlefield with only a single synthesizer.....

Next came the sound of the spinning helicopter rotors, shattering the cries of the birds, and what followed after, was an intense fanfare from the horns. It was America's national anthem. The blaring of the cars' horns seemed to mock the simple tune of **<The Star-Spangled Banner>**, which sounded as though it were coming from an old radio. So that's what he meant when he said he was performing Jimi Hendrix.....?

The ecstatic Tomo jumped barefoot onto the synthesizer and began banging on the keyboard of the synthesizer as though he were tap dancing. I never would have expected to see that at a disco event. However, the crowd broke into a loud cheer in response to his act; Julien was yelling excitedly beside me as well. I was the only person praying for the synthesizer to survive till the end.



"It's already dark. Want me to send you to the station?" I asked Julien. However, his reply was, "I have called a car over already, so I am okay." Then again..... I think I cycled my way here, yeah?

Walking on a gravel path, we made our way to the parking lot where my bicycle was. The remaining heat from the ground rose up from beneath us. A constant stream of people from the audience walked out of the live house, and all of them were exhausted due to their intense enjoyment of the concert.

"Naomi, do you listen to such music frequently?"

"Hmm..... occasionally."

"I am so jealous. I want to visit more places like this live house."

As a famous violinist, it must be difficult for him to go to places he wants to. I had actually never expected him to cater his schedule to mine.

"I will try my best to make myself free whenever Naomi invites me."

Julien flashed me a sly smile after he said that.

"You rendered me speechless today, so it will be my turn next time. Just you wait!"

It's better that you don't..... Why don't we just end our feud here and now?

"But I cannot stay in Japan for too long. That is why..... I am really jealous."

"You're jealous?"

"I am jealous of Naomi, and at the same time, I am jealous of Mafuyu as well. It would be great if we could be together forever....."

"Look..... my feelings for her are not what you're imagining," I was grasping for words. "Mafuyu..... She's a really impressive guitarist. I liked the sound of her guitar, and that's why I wanted to start a band with her....."

"Hmmm? Really?"

Julien tilted his head and narrowed his eyes, looking at me with a mischievous expression. That pissed me off. I already told you the truth!

"Oh well, whatever. I will take it as the truth for today. However, I still cannot allow you to stay by Mafuyu's side."

"This again? Can we just stop talking about it....."

"But I do not want to. That is why..... I said this before, right? That I would take Mafuyu's place by Naomi's side. I was serious about that. What do you think?"

I shook my hands vigorously. There's too many problems with that suggestion of yours. With a slightly depressed expression on his face, Julien muttered, "I see....." But he reverted back to his cheerful smile within seconds.

"I think I finally understand the reason why Mafuyu and Naomi are together."

"..... Really?"

I don't understand at all—right when I finished saying that, Julien burst into a loud laugh.

"Mafuyu and I are really alike. We can talk to each other easily, and we have both been in the musical world since we were young. Our ways of thinking are very similar, and this applies to our preferences as well. Bach, Beethoven and Mendelssohn. To go on further, there's also Prokofiev, Scriabin, and even Schoenberg....."

Julien listed the music Mafuyu liked. Hearing that..... It seems like Julien has chosen a lot of Bach pieces for his solo performances as well?

"That is why I understand. Because Mafuyu and I will fall in love with the same person as well."

"Hmm?"

Indeed, there must be some striking similarities between the two of them if they both liked Scriabin and Schoenberg. Seeing me nod my head repeatedly, Julien laughed so hard his shoulders started trembling. He was close to rolling about on the floor—that was how ridiculous his laughter was. What's wrong? What's so funny?

Just then, I saw the headlights of a car approaching from the other end of the narrow road.

Julien waved at the incoming car, then suddenly turned his head around to look at me.

"Oh. I have a request, Naomi."

"Yes?"

"I did ask you to address me as 'Yuri,' right? It feels really embarrassing having you call me 'Julien.'"

"Ah, mmm. Sure....."

No wait, hold on. Who are you to tell me that?

"It's embarrassing for me as well, yeah? So stop calling me Naomi already."

"No way." He stuck out his tongue. "It's too unfair if Mafuyu is the only one that can call you by your real name."

How's that unfair? Before I could retort, he was already kicking pebbles and running towards the car. The blurred outline of his body disappeared behind the tightly shut door of the co-driver's seat.

I guess..... it's my victory today? As I listened to the exhaust of the departing car, I suddenly thought, "When will he strike back?" I had no idea what he would do to me.

I then realized I was actually looking forward to my next meeting with him. I was surprised by that feeling of mine.



I was in a really solemn mood when I realized I had to report my duel with Julien to my fellow band members. Senpai must be really interested in it, and Mafuyu's gaze would be incredibly painful if I didn't say anything.....

But that was just me overthinking things. Another incident became the root of my headaches at school the next day.

"Look here, everyone. Here's a picture of Julien in drag. He was sticking himself so intimately close to young man, and they were happily chatting away in whispers too. And in this picture—they were actually holding hands....."

"What are you doing!?"

When I reached the practice room after school, I was infuriated by the scene of Senpai proudly spreading her photos out on the table, one piece at a time. Chiaki looked at the pictures excitedly, while Mafuyu stared at them intensely, clearly in an angry mood. The stars of the pictures were none other than Julien and me, when we were both at Bright.

"This..... H-How did you get your hands on these photos? Was Senpai there as well?"

"Why must I do something befitting a stalker? I don't have that much free time. I know lots of people at the live house, so after figuring out when you would bring him there, I got them to take the pictures for me."

"You criminal!"

"Indeed. Despite being a guy, he's so incredibly adorable. That's really criminal of him."

"Stop trying to change the topic!"

"Oh yeah, DJ Tomo told me about how you subdued Julien. It seems like you had put a great deal of effort into it, right? You've stolen my heart yet again, young man!"

Senpai placed her hands on my shoulders, then flashed a light smile at the infuriated me—my anger vanished in an instant. Forget it. It's pointless to talk to her anyway.

"Senpai, Senpai. I want this, this and this."

"Sure. Feel free to print as many photos as you want."

"No!"

Mafuyu snatched the photos from Chiaki's hands, and was about to crush them, but Chiaki snatched them right back. Senpai intervened by hugging the both of them tightly. I pressed my hand against my head as it began to ache. I decided to leave the girls alone, so I grabbed my bass and quietly left the classroom.

I'll have to practice even harder—so I can fight against Julien's retaliation as a musician.

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## Notes

1. Wiki link of *Hello! Project* [here](#). Main point is, it's a female idol collective

## Chapter 3 - Rhythm Section

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As I mentioned before, our school had a large music hall that was capable of accommodating more than a thousand people.

The size of the music hall was huge; and sometimes, bands from town would even use the music hall as a venue for their concerts. It was a facility our school was proud of.

However, Kagurazaka said this as she sat down in the last row of seats, looking downwards with her hands crossed in front of her chest:

"This won't do. This venue isn't suitable."

"Why?"

The first-year male student and I asked at the same time. He was one of the first-year members of the school festival committee, and had followed us here earlier.

"Because we're a rock band!" Chiaki stuck her head out from behind and answered before Kagurazaka-senpai could. "Think back to the chorus contest—the people in the audience couldn't even stand up to enjoy themselves, right?"

I faced the stage and looked at the audience's seats, which were arranged in the shape of a bowl. It was just as she said. If people in the audience became engrossed in the beats of the rock music and started shaking their heads about, a slight careless movement could result in an unfortunate accident, with the audience member falling over and getting injured, or even dying.

"Well, since most of the stage lighting is located in the sports hall, I think it'd much better to hold our performance there."

A month had passed, and the school festival was already drawing close.

Because the sports hall and the music hall were both available as venues for the school festival, there wasn't a need to worry about not being able to accommodate all the music performances and stage performances.



Well..... that's only if Senpai and Chiaki don't make any unreasonable requests.

"Urm..... but the sports hall is already booked for the Drama Club's performance and the class performances. Moreover, the Karate Club forced themselves onto the schedule just yesterday, as they wanted to do a martial arts performance, so the schedule for that venue is full. Can't we just have all the musical performances here?"

The committee member spoke to Senpai in a polite manner, and observed her with a timid look on his face. He was probably stuck with the task of following us around till everything was settled, as the festival committee had probably anticipated that the Folk Music Research Club would create some sort of problem. Sorry—I apologized in my heart and slapped my palms together.

"To put it more explicitly, the stage is the furnace of our passion, and is something I cannot control. The audience will definitely jump about in excitement, and some may even rush up to the front of the stage! And if anyone got hurt, it'd be a problem for the committee, right?"

The committee member could only answer with an unintelligible "Ah, u-uhh....." as Kagurazaka-senpai pressed on. She had cleverly turned her selfish request into a matter of public safety, essentially forcing the committee member to accept her request as a precautionary measure against certain disaster. Senpai's as cunning as ever.

"I-I'll discuss it with the rest of the committee."

The committee member ended up running away from us. And as I looked at his back, I prayed that he would be luckier in the future.

"Oh right, I'll be going to the student council's office for a while," said Senpai, with her arms crossed in front of her chest.

"What for?"

"Obviously to check on the clubs that'll be using the sports hall. From here on out, we'll have to be on the lookout for some way to cut into the queue."

Senpai's hair swayed about like the tail feathers of a cuckoo as

she ran away. I let out a sigh as I watched her disappear. She may look like someone that does things sloppily, but when she's hatching a ploy or something, she really gets serious. I wonder what she'll be like when she steps out into society.

"Things will be getting busy!"

Said Chiaki in enjoyment. During those busy days, there was no time for me to catch my breath after school. Though the chorus contest had already finished, the sports day was fast approaching, and after that was the school festival. Those hectic high school days, filled with all sorts of activities, continued on until November.



Chiaki and I were headed to the music preparatory room located at the other end of the corridor. There, Mafuyu was looking for pieces that could potentially be used for our performance at the school festival. She was working hard because of Kagurazaka-senpai's willful words: "I do not wish to perform the same piece twice on stage. We've gathered ourselves a group of interesting people, so I want to try dabbling in classical music."

However, someone at the other end of the corridor spotted Chiaki and me and started walking towards us. She stopped in front of us and stretched her arms out, preventing Chiaki and me from moving forward. The person before us was none other than the music teacher that wore the shortest skirt—Miss Maki.

"It's best..... to leave Mafuyu alone for now."

"Did something happen?"

"Mmm—"

Miss Maki jerked her thumb towards the door of the preparation room. There wasn't any need for her to explain any further.

Sounds of the piano endlessly flowed from the room.

The three of us stood in the middle of the corridor for a long time, listening to the music that had passed through the wooden door and swirled around our ears. The gentle stampede of the passage sounded just like the footsteps amid the crowd.

"..... I've heard this piece somewhere."

Chiaki mumbled.

"It's <Limoges>."

It was the twelfth movement of Modest Mussorgsky's <Pictures at an Exhibition>. It was a piano suite that consisted of diverse elements that had been inspired by the paintings of a deceased friend.

Rimsky-Korsakov brought about a renaissance of the piece that stimulated the imagination of musicians around the world, giving birth to all sorts of different transcriptions of the orchestra pieces. I never quite liked that piece, as the original version sounded very crude; and I had never once bought it—however, my opinion of the piece changed when I heard the sounds of the piano on the other side of the door.

But Mafuyu hasn't recorded this piece before. I unconsciously walked next to the wooden door and pressed my forehead against it, to listen attentively to the sounds coming from inside. The tempo of the tune coming from the room was much slower than the tempo of the <Limoges> typically played by other pianists. A slightly depressing atmosphere was mixed into the light and skillful tune.

It felt as though I could see my destination before me, after walking down the path in the marketplace.

The rapid steps were suddenly interrupted by a thick and heavy chord. I was shocked motionless in front of the dark entrance.

It was the thirteenth movement—<Catacombæ>.

The sounds of my heartbeat and my breathing reverberated in the cold air.

A sense of emptiness was brought about by the weakening sounds of the piano.

It was just unbelievable. I couldn't believe it, even after hearing it with my own ears.

Mafuyu was playing the piano, and she didn't play any single one of the notes wrong.

Mafuyu's fingers have really.....

Not long after, the rays of the setting sun started faintly penetrating through the lingering smell of mildew, bones, death and dust. It was <Promenade>, the fourteenth movement—

Just then, the music from the piano suddenly stopped. I pulled my face away from the door in shock, and heard the tapping of footsteps. The door suddenly opened with great force.

Mafuyu's face turned red the moment her eyes met mine. She said furiously,

"S-Stop listening while you just stand there!"

"Eh, oh, sorry..... Does that mean we can go in and listen?"

"..... N-No!"

So we can't go in, and we can't stay outside? What do you want us to do then? Mafuyu slammed the door shut after stepping back into the room. We then heard the door lock. Eh? Hey!

"Why are you locking yourself in the room?" I immediately knocked on the door. "Let us in! I need to grab all sorts of musical scores from in there!"

"You can't!"

Why? Does Mafuyu have to get that angry just because someone heard her play the piano? Just as I was about to yell at the door, someone suddenly pulled the back of my collar.

"Guee!" I unintentionally let out a strange noise.

"You are not to cause a ruckus here. Just leave her alone for now."

With that said, Miss Maki began walking towards the stairs, dragging me with her. My limbs were thrashing about wildly, as I was about to asphyxiate. Chiaki stared bitterly at the door of the preparatory room for a while, then followed after us.

"Actually, Mafuyu has been practicing on the piano in the preparatory room for a few days already, and has always acted the same as she did just now. She seemed to have been set ablaze after looking at various scores. And before I knew it, she was already playing the piano, completely ignoring my presence next to her."

Miss Maki said that in a low voice at the corner of the stairs. Chiaki

and I exchanged looks.

"Have her fingers..... really recovered? Is that true?" asked Chiaki.

"You two have heard about it already?"

I nodded my head slightly. What a perfect performance it was! I had always thought I would never get to hear Mafuyu's piano again, so I was very surprised when I heard the news from Julien. But the impact was even greater when I listened to her performance earlier.

"So her impairment seems to be something caused by psychological issues..... I guess? Because of that, I feel it's still too early to be happy about the recovery of her fingers. But in any case, it looks like that girl is planning to return to the embrace of the piano. However, because Maestro Ebisawa would probably kick up a fuss out of happiness if she were to practice at home, she's only practicing at school for now."

That's because there are still some knots in the relationship between Mafuyu and Ebichiri; and moreover, Mafuyu's a really stubborn girl.

Then again, I never thought she would recover to such a state.

"Since this is quite a pickle, please do not disturb her for now."

"W-When did Mafuyu start practicing the piano again?"

"Hmm? Last month, I think?"

So it's true she only started practicing after she reunited with Julien, huh? Everything made sense if that was the cause.

Even the doctors said we could only wait—and Julien was the one we were waiting for.

Before walking down the stairs, Miss Maki sternly instructed us to not get close to the preparatory room if sounds of the piano were coming from inside. Then, she left Chiaki and I at the corner. I leaned against the stairs.

"Mafuyu..... that's just great."

Chiaki murmured, as she looked up the stairs. We could no longer hear music coming from above us.

"Are you not happy about it, Nao? Mafuyu can play the piano

again, you know?"

"No, I'm happy. But even though I'm happy....."

"Speak your mind. Come on?"

Chiaki grabbed me by the collar and rattled me about. I revealed my true feelings.

"It's frustrating. Even I find myself to be a huge idiot."

"What do you mean?"

All of today, I've just been pulled around by the scruff of my neck..... When Chiaki questioned me further, I told her about everything in my heart—about how Mafuyu had changed because of her reunion with Julien, and about how I couldn't do anything.

When I finished telling her everything, Chiaki released me and stared in the direction of the window.

"..... Is that so?"

Her restless voice landed at her feet.

"So Nao's feeling frustrated because he couldn't do anything for Mafuyu?"

"Mmm..... yeah."

What's wrong with Chiaki? Her back looked very small.

It felt as though she would cry the moment I touched her hands.

"That's right—it's painful precisely because the person's right next to us."

It seemed like Chiaki was mumbling to herself. I thought about what she said for a while, and just when I was about to say something back to her, she quickly turned her head around.

"Well then, what would you have done back then?"

Chiaki's usual determined gaze had returned to her eyes. She then greeted my stomach with a solid punch, which landed squarely with a thud. Ouch! I staggered back a few steps as I pressed my hands against my stomach.

"..... I would've gone back home and listened to <London Calling> beneath my blanket."

"You idiot. Listen to it yourself."

This time around, she rewarded my head with a slap. What do you want me to do then?

"Do I even have to say it? Practice."



The term "rhythm section" originally started out as a jazz term describing the combination of the piano, the bass, and the drums. These instruments didn't need to perform solo, and instead, only had to ensure that the tempo of the song went on without a hitch. For our band, this was Chiaki and me.

The general opinion was that the quality of a band wasn't determined by the talent of its striking vocalists or guitarists, but by the rigor of its rhythm section. One of the most notable examples would be a band like Green Day.

"..... So..... why am I doing push-ups here?"

"Because you lack physical strength! Hey, no resting!"

Chiaki stepped on the pedals of the bass drum as my sweat dripped onto the floor of what should've been the air-conditioned practice room of the Folk Music Research Club. I'm not bragging here, but the maximum number of push-ups I can do is ten.

"Listen. Nao was drained at the end of our live performance at the live house, no? Mafuyu always rushes ahead of us when we play as a band, so we need to step it up."

"Now that you mention it..... I am really weak."

"You should at least train till you can lift one of the guitar amplifiers with a single hand."

"How could I possibly lift that?"

"I can."

Whoa! She actually showed me. Put that down, that's really dangerous.

"No rest. Your goal is thirty push-ups."

Chiaki pressed me against the floor again. Please, just spare me

from this already.

"It somehow feels like your perseverance is lacking. I'll be sitting on your back now."

"No way, you're heavy! I'll get squashed!"

I struggled nonstop as Chiaki squashed me under her butt. The door opened slightly; and through the small slit, a pair of sapphire eyes timidly peeking into the room could be seen. Chiaki stood up immediately when she noticed.

"Mafuyu, what are you doing?"

"W-Well....."

Chiaki grabbed Mafuyu's hands and pulled her into the room. I'm saved. I stood up to pat the dust off my knees.

"..... S-Sorry..... for just now."

"Mmm, I'll spare you this time, since you're being honest." Why's Chiaki acting stuck-up? "But someone was engrossed in her piano even though we had something important to do as a band. The camaraderie of the band was wrecked in an instant by Mafu-Mafu."

"I was not engrossed in it!" Mafuyu tried her hardest to lie.

"Well then, I will entrust Mafuyu with a task related to the band."

"..... Which is?"

"Sit on Nao's back."

"Why?" "What's with that!?"

"Because you can practice the guitar even if you're sitting on Nao's back! I have to drum, you know."

"That's not the point."

With her eyes narrowed into slits, Chiaki thrust her drumstick at my throat.

"Alright, you still have thirty more to go, so persevere. Give me some clean push-ups, and match them to the beats of my drum."

That's scary! I dropped to the floor without a second thought. Having experienced the same dominating air of that sports-oriented girl, Mafuyu did just as Chiaki instructed and sat down gingerly on



my back.

"Min! On! Fight!!! Min! On! Fight!!!" 

Chiaki began shouting out some strange cheer as she drummed in beats of four. What's with this? Is she a school bully? Moreover, Mafuyu's pressing down on my back with her entire weight—

Eh? She's not as heavy as I thought. Or rather, she's inconceivably light. Is her body really that slender? Come to think of it, didn't I climb the hills together with Mafuyu while carrying our luggage? Push-ups are nothing compared to that.

The beats of the drum suddenly came to a stop.

"I'm so pissed! Why's Nao doing those push-ups with an indifferent expression on your face!?"

Because you asked me to!

"You looked like you were in pain when I was sitting on you. Ah, darn. How much do you weigh, Mafuyu?"

"Eh, urm....." I didn't catch her muffled answer.

"Unforgivable! I'll be sitting on Nao as well!"

"Why!? Don't, I'll die!" "It'll be fine, so stop moving!" "W-We are falling!"

I couldn't breathe under the combined weight of the two girls. But at that moment, Kagurazaka-senpai just happened to open the door; and when she saw the plight I was in, her eyes opened wide.

"H-Help me—"

Upon hearing my pitiful plea, a sinister smile appeared on Senpai's face.

"Where should I sit? On your head?"

"No, wait, don't do that!" Why did things turn out like this!?



When I returned home, I didn't catch any glimpses of Tetsurou anywhere in the house, and his shoes weren't in the shoe cabinet when I looked inside. That meant there was a high possibility he had stayed out for a drink with his friends (Tetsurou usually wore sandals

when he went out). Thank god, I don't have to prepare dinner tonight. I didn't have much of an appetite after being put through that strange form of torture. Not to mention, my back's still aching.....

After I finished changing in my bedroom on the second floor, I took out my bass. The words Chiaki had said to me during the day were still echoing in my mind:

*"So Nao's feeling frustrated because he couldn't do anything for Mafuyu?"*

Mafuyu, Kagurazaka-senpai, and Furukawa, whom we had performed with on the same stage last month—

And more than anyone else, Julien.

After thinking about the numerous outstanding musicians I had come into contact with, and the music I had heard them play, I was left with a complicated feeling inside me. I understood how immature I was, but mixed in with that immaturity was also a sense of helplessness.

If this continues, I'll eventually become someone who just happened to be in the band by chance. I'll even end up dragging the band down. Furukawa had once said to me, straight to my face, *"You should quit for the sake of the band."* My reply to that was nothing more than just a farce.

What should I do? What step should I take next? I had no idea at all.

It wasn't until I had met Julien that I finally saw it.

I understood the question I had to answer.

Am I able to become Mafuyu's greatest pillar of support?

Not just for the guitarist Mafuyu, but also for the pianist Mafuyu—can I continue to stay by her side by taking on the role of the heart that pumps her blood and life?

The timbre of Mafuyu's piano was bright and clear, and its tempo, forceful and dynamic. Some of the conductors who had performed with her before had commented that her piano was "as forceful as the river that continuously erodes the fjords." The reason Mafuyu's playing was harshly criticized was because there were very few

orchestras capable of accepting the force of her playing. And so, Mafuyu's fingers became frozen, and the sound of her piano disappeared before she could find her true place of belonging.

I used to think she would never return to the embrace of the piano; but that wasn't the case. Perhaps Mafuyu is just searching for that place.

Someone who could be next to her, or close to her, while supporting her playing—a place that existed forever.

Do I..... have the right to be there?

Perhaps Yuri's the only person that can reach that place for now.

But how much further do I have to walk before I can reach that place as well?

I turned on the stereo and inserted a CD. My fingers searched for the simple overlapping bass lines that could accompany Mafuyu's solo of Rachmaninoff's [\*\*<Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini>\*\*](#). Mafuyu's piano led the orchestra methodically as she rapidly changed the tempo of the variation.

I gradually lost hold of the sound of my bass. I couldn't keep up with her pace at all.

In my mind was the image of Mafuyu, sitting before the piano as she appeared on feketerigó's stage. And in front of the raised wings that gave off a black luster, I saw the faintly glowing drums, as well as Chiaki's brown-colored hair. When I turned my head, I saw the back of Kagurazaka-senpai. She was standing there, holding tightly to the microphone on the stand, facing the passionate audience.

It began with a piano chorale that rose from the silence, followed by the careful integration of the drums via fill-ins. Next, came the clean overlapping tones of the guitar, and finally, the coarse vocals of Senpai, that could seep into the deepest areas of the body.<sup>[2]</sup>

But where do I stand?

How should I go about carving out my rhythm on the stage?

I had no idea. That place was just too far, too high, and too dazzling for me.

Rachmaninoff's piece ended, and the stereo at the head of my bed

stopped playing. I was pulled back to reality, back to my room. I realized I had been deep in thought while I was sitting on my bed with my bass in my arms.

What should I do?

In my head, Chiaki's voice replied with, "*Do I even have to say it? Practice.*" She's right.

I really want to plug my bass into some amplifiers and practice at the loudest volume possible! But there was a limit to the time I could spend in the school's practice room; and there, I'd be distracted by Senpai's and Mafuyu's timbres anyway. And although Tetsurou wasn't at home, I couldn't use the speakers in the living room, as I'd disturb the neighbors if I did that.

If that's the case—

I checked the time on the clock. It's not eight yet, so I should be able to make it. After packing my bass into its case, I jumped on my bike and left the house.



The southern entrance of the sizable train station was about twenty minutes away from my house by bicycle, and the building Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store was located in, was just a few steps away from the overhead bridge, at the boundary between the shopping street and the residential area.

It was Senpai's workplace, and I had been under their care on numerous occasions. There were three recording studios on the third floor that were rather small and cramped, but because Senpai knew the store manager's weaknesses (though she called it a privilege of the employees), the store manager allowed the members of feketerigó to use the studios for free, as long as they weren't occupied.

I did pity the store manager, but as a poor student, I was grateful for the privilege as well.

"Eh? Nao?"

When I walked into the store—where even the walking space was filled with guitars—the store manager revealed his face from behind

a music magazine. Looks like he's manning the store by himself. His hair was tied up roughly behind his head, making him look like a hippie; and that appearance of his made the store seem even more like it was on the brink of collapse. There aren't any customers around today as well.

"Did you guys agree to meet up beforehand? She already went up," said the store manager, pointing towards the ceiling.

"..... Eh? Are you referring to..... Senpai?"

"Nope. Chi-chan."

Upon opening the ridiculously heavy soundproof door, I was greeted by sounds of intense drumming. However, the beats stopped all of a sudden.

"..... Nao?"

Chiaki was sitting behind the drums, her forehead glistening with sweat. When she saw me, she froze with her mouth opened wide. The same applied to me as well. Why is Chiaki here? Was all that practicing we did earlier not enough for her?

"Hey? What's going on here?"

Chiaki walked in my direction. Her face was giving off a radiant glow. Even though it was already October, she was only wearing a T-shirt and short pants. Her outfit was very similar to what she had worn during our summer training camp. Then again, it *is* really hot and stuffy in these studios.

"Eh? Are you actually here to practice?" She asked, when she saw my guitar case.

"Y-Yeah..... I want to practice with amplifiers."

"You'll have to stop practicing if any customers show up." With that said, the store manager pushed me into the studio and closed the door. The smell of tobacco oozing from the walls was mixed in with the sweet scent of sweat. And for some unknown reason, Chiaki was happily setting up the bass's amplifiers for me.

"What a coincidence. I'm really surprised. I was feeling really uneasy because of the lack of practice today. Did Nao come because you found the amount of push-ups to be lacking as well?"

"Nope, I've done enough push-ups. Also, am I bothering you here?"

"Not at all. Because together, we're the rhythm section, so It'd be better for us to play together."

But if possible, I hope to practice alone on my bass.....

"Oh well, let's start! Just treat me as a metronome and play your bass!"

After beginning our practice, I realized it was just as Chiaki said—the bass and the drums were not enemies. Just like the sounds of heartbeats and footsteps, the instruments resonated with each other to move forward. The quavers, semiquavers and triplets—Chiaki supported my stiff wobbles with her steady steps.

What an inconceivable feeling. Come to think of it, this might be my first time playing alone with Chiaki. Normally, the sound of Kagurazaka-senpai's guitar (like the scattering rays of the sun) or Mafuyu's guitar (akin to the crystallization of the cold air in a night bathed in the moon's light) would be mixed in between us.

It's mind-boggling. Compared to the sound of the drums when Chiaki was drumming alone by herself, the sounds the drums made now were much brighter—I could clearly hear each and every beat from her. Each time I pumped blood into my bass using my fingers, the comfortable sound of a footstep would reciprocate. I could almost grasp the glimmer of the two hi-hat cymbals with my hands.



"..... Wait, Chiaki. Let's rest for a while."

We had been practicing nonstop for god knows how long, and thanks to my sore wrists, it was really difficult for me to even pull my

fingers off the strings to ask Chiaki to stop. Drops of sweat were trickling down my hair.

"Mafuyu would be able to continue playing, you know?"

The red-faced Chiaki said that provocatively, as she swerved her knees and shoulders happily.

"Nope, sorry. I can't do that."

I took a gulp from my water bottle. I finally kind of understood why Mafuyu always played nonstop—as though she had been bitten by a tarantula or something—when she played together with Chiaki.

Because the "legs" moved on their own. There was no way we could stop.

With a smile on her face, Chiaki stood up from her chair and snatched the bottle of water away from my hands and chugged it. Water seeped out of the corners of her mouth and flowed down her neck, onto her collarbone.

"Phew!"

After sighing, Chiaki took her hair clip off and shook her head. Some of her hair was stuck to her wet lips. I quickly diverted my gaze for some strange reason.

"It has been a while since I had so much fun drumming."

"..... Aren't you having fun all the time?"

"Hmm?"

Chiaki gave me a puzzled look as she stretched her wrists while holding her drumsticks.

"That's not true. I actually get really nervous whenever Senpai or Mafuyu is around."

I looked at Chiaki's face in shock.

"Those two girls..... It's not nice to say this, but they're practically monsters. I feel really uneasy whenever I'm drumming behind them. There are times when I think to myself, 'Can I really sit here?'"

I slowly sat myself down on a round chair with uneven legs, and stared blankly at Chiaki's face. It looked like she was gazing at a faraway place.



So she experiences such feelings..... as well, huh?

"I know, Senpai invited me into the band without any expectations of me as a drummer, and there's nothing I can do about that. But someday, I hope she'll say to me 'We cannot do without you.'"

There was nothing I could say. Chiaki was around Senpai much earlier than I was, and was deeply attracted by Senpai's tone. However, she too, knew she lacked the ability to respond to Senpai's timbre, and stuck closely to Senpai's side precisely because she knew that.

—That's exactly like me right now. However, she didn't avert her eyes, or run away from anything. She didn't stagnate because of her sense of helplessness. She wasn't defeated by it.

That's how impressive Chiaki is.

"..... Chiaki's already our indispensable drummer."

I tried telling her truthfully.

A brief look of loneliness flashed in Chiaki's eyes. Then, she smiled shyly and said,

"Thanks. I hope there'll come a day when Senpai will say that to me as well."

"Senpai has probably felt that way all along, yeah? You're already really impressive, Chiaki. To think you could come this far just because of your love for Senpai—"

Chiaki suddenly stretched her hand out and pressed the tip of her drumstick against my collarbone.

"W-What?"

"Nao, you just said something really rude."

"Eh, why?"

"It's not only because I like Senpai. I'm not so simple that I would bind myself tightly to the band just for that reason alone."

"U-Urm..... S-Sorry."

Yeah..... her relationship with Mafuyu has improved as well, and she did always like hard rock, and never backed down when we ran into disagreements regarding song arrangements.

"..... But my biggest misfortune's probably the fact that the person I like has been together with me in the band since the very beginning."

Chiaki suddenly leaned weakly against the wall and murmured,

"I'm really satisfied with the way things are right now. Even if there's no progress in our relationship..... isn't it great for us to be together like this for now? I have no idea what I should do anyway. Moreover, our relationship may become irreparable if I try to force it to the next step, and we'll never be able to revert things to the way they were. If that's the case, I might as well keep things the way they are....."

I had no idea why, but I could more or less understand her feelings. If we're talking about Senpai, it'd be impossible for things to end well regardless of what they do, since they're both girls. No, Senpai would probably think things would work themselves out or something. I really can't tell if Senpai is serious about the things she says, but at the very least, they can be together in the same place for now.

But that won't do. Things won't go anywhere if Chiaki's content with the status quo. There'll come a day when Senpai finally outruns her, and after that, Chiaki won't be able to catch up to Senpai again.

It's the same for me as well.

I'm by Mafuyu's side, at a much closer distance than Julien is.

But that status quo is only something that happened by chance.

Just then, Chiaki began drumming on my shoulders, forehead and chest with her drumsticks. Owowow! I lifted my arms in an attempt to shield myself, but she ended up rapping on them mercilessly as well.

"H-Hold on, Chiaki, that really hurts! Why are you hitting me? What's wrong?"

"Nothing! Hey, rest time's over, so let's get going! We'll never catch up to them if all we do is rest."

Chiaki roared at me all of a sudden. She then tossed the water bottle back to me and returned to her seat behind the drums. What the heck's with that?

"Didn't Senpai tell you already? We'll be performing multiple suites during the school festival! And there'll be no time for both of us to rest, so we have to practice the variations we'll be playing during the transitions more."

"M-Mmm."

Earlier in the day, when Senpai returned from the student council's office, she told us she had managed to obtain permission to use the sports hall. However, that meant the festival committee would have to reorganize the timetable all over again, so we didn't know how much time we would be allocated. Because of that, Senpai suggested we work on longer-duration pieces, to fully utilize the limited amount of time we would have. While the vocals and guitar solos would be separated by different phases, there would likely be no time for the rhythm section to pause and rest, so there was a high possibility that Chiaki and I would have to be the ones to maintain the heated atmosphere of the performance.

"There's no charm in Nao's bass at all!"

"Mmm....."

I kind of realized it myself as well, but that was still one of the most truthful, and yet harshest, criticisms I had ever received from someone else. I see, so it lacks charm.....

"You know, you're coordinating with me too much. It might be safer for you to play along with the bass drums, but you'll never get into the spotlight like that. You are to add in a phrase whenever I pause. Understand?"

"..... Got it."

"Let's start from the intro!"

After twirling around Chiaki's right palm once, the drumstick landed straight on the floor tom. I squeezed a series of low notes in from behind the beats, which sounded as though they were digging into the ground. The cramped stage was once again engulfed by the passionate heartbeats.

When people say they "lose track of time," they really do mean that.

We continued playing, despite being drenched with sweat, and

didn't even have time to catch our breaths. When I regained my senses, I heard someone singing. I was wondering to myself where I had heard that voice before; and then I realized—the singer was none other than me. The bass and the drums formed the "shape" of the band, which we could then expand on using our imagination of all the notes. I couldn't bring myself not to sing. We didn't even notice the red light lighting up, signaling the end of our time. It was only when the store manager gingerly came in to stop us, switching off the power supply, that we realized we were exhausted—we immediately slumped to the floor.

I could still faintly feel the vibration of the strings on my fingers—it felt just great.



From the next day onward, Chiaki and I decided to head to Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store every day after school to practice. Since Senpai cycled to and from school, and Mafuyu lived in the opposite direction of us, we were the only ones that took our particular train home.

"Let's practice in secret and surprise them!"

Chiaki said that to me excitedly. However—

"You and young man have been frequenting the studio a lot lately."

"Eh? W-What do you mean?"

Chiaki feigned ignorance when Senpai brought the topic up. Then again, Senpai was an employee there, so it was natural for her to know.

"To think that both of you were hiding it from Comrade Ebisawa and me—that's very cold of you two."

"Because we were planning to surprise the hell out of you two during the actual performance, after we had undergone intensive training in secret!"

"Whatever. I shall make use of this time to deepen the friendship between Comrade Ebisawa and me."

"E-Eh?"

Mafuyu, who was sneaking peeks at us while strumming her guitar in the corner of the room, suddenly jumped up in shock. Her hair rose for an instant.

"You guys probably don't know this, but Comrade Ebisawa recently came crying to me. While hugging me, she complained about how young man had been ignoring her, so I had no choice but to console her."

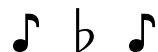
Eh? Me?

"Stupid Kyouko! I did not do that!"

Mafuyu stood up with her face flushed red. Quit staring at me! Don't worry, I didn't believe a single word Senpai said.

Senpai ended the topic frivolously by hugging Mafuyu tightly and tapping her gently on the shoulders. She then turned to face me and said,

"I'm glad to see that everyone's fired up."



But something happened that poured cold water over us.

It was after school on a Friday. Because the sports day was coming up soon, Chiaki and Mafuyu had been required to attend our class's practice for the approaching interclass fight, meaning they couldn't come to club activities till later. Since I had nothing to do, I decided to make a trip to the music preparatory room to look for some classical music scores we could use for our performance.

By the time I returned with a bundle of sloppily picked music scores, everyone had already gathered in the practice room. It seemed Chiaki and Mafuyu had rushed down to the clubroom straight from their practice—they were still wearing the blue and yellowish-green cheerleading outfits. However, the atmosphere in the room was incredibly heavy, and it seemed as though the colors of their costume had dulled because of that. Just what is happening here?

"It seems we've only been allocated twenty minutes for our performance....."

Said Chiaki, in a distressed mood.

"W-What?"

"I'm talking about the amount of time we can use the sports hall for during the school festival. They said the performances by the Drama Club and Karate Club filled the schedule, so they could only spare us a maximum of twenty minutes."

"Twen....."

I was at a loss for words. It would've been okay if we could have performed four to five songs in twenty minutes, but fifty minutes had gone by in a flash during our live performance back in summer.

There's no way Chiaki and I can show off the results of our special training with such a short amount of time. Everyone was taking longer than usual to prepare their instrument, probably because we were all depressed over the bad news.

"There's not much we can do with just twenty minutes. It'd be over as soon as we finished heating up the atmosphere."

"..... Kyouko, is there nothing we can do?"

Mafuyu looked at Kagurazaka-senpai, who was hugging one of her knees while sitting down on the long table in the room.

However, there was no response from Senpai. She didn't say anything at all. All she did was press her forehead against her knee.

"Kyouko?"

"Mmm? Ah, nothing. Sorry. I was just..... thinking about something."

Senpai must've suffered a huge blow after hearing about the committee members' solution to the situation. However, knowing Senpai, she's probably already thinking of a way to break the deadlock.....

"My eyes are drawn to their cheerleading outfits. What do you think, young man? Let's wear that for our performance."

"Please be more serious about this!"

I slammed my fist into the wall without even thinking. Senpai said unhappily,

"I *am* thinking about it seriously. I think they should be here soon."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Our enemies."



When the school bell—the putative indicator of the end of school—rang at five, the door of our practice room was suddenly vigorously knocked on. But we were practicing at the time, so the room was filled with the sound of rock music. If I hadn't been leaning against the door, we wouldn't have even realized someone was knocking.

I raised my hand to stop our playing. That was my responsibility as part of the rhythm section—the music would come to a stop very quickly if the sound of either the bass or the drums was missing.

"..... Someone's here?"

Asked Senpai, as she wiped off her sweat. I nodded my head and opened the door.

"Hello, sorry for interrupting—"

The first person to step into the room, greeting us with a stupid-sounding voice, was a tall second-year student with a funny face. I had seen him a few times in the student council's office—he was indeed one of its members. Another four people followed in after him, making the practice room cramped as a result.

"Well then, Kagurazaka, as per our agreement, I have brought them here. You can discuss your matters over there."

The student council member waved his hand irresponsibly. The situation was a bit scary because behind him, were two stocky guys outfitted in karate gear. Additionally, there were also two..... girls(?) dressed in kinagashis, with pairs of daishos hanging off their waists. I had no idea what was going on; and Mafuyu had hid herself behind Chiaki in fear.<sup>[3]</sup>

"Wait, why are we discussing in a place like this?"

Asked one of the girls in the vagabond garb unhappily.

"Didn't I explain already?"

The student council member answered in an irritatingly relaxed tone.

"Because the timing for the class performances is untouchable! And after also taking the masquerade contest into account, there's only two hours left to split amongst the Drama Club, Karate Club and Folk Music Research Club. Negotiate amongst yourselves if you have a problem with the times allotted by us."

Oh, those two samurai are from the Drama Club—so they came here in costume. I was shocked by their appearance earlier.....

"See ya, Kagurazaka."

The student council member gently waved his hand and walked out of the practice room, pushing the samurai and the karate duos aside. In other words, the student council and the festival committee members have shoved the problematic scheduling onto us. How can they be so irresponsible?

"The Folk Music Research Club should perform in the music hall!"

Said the tall black belt irritatingly, as he sat on the bass amplifiers.

"That would solve everything. Things are only complicated because you guys cut in from behind."

"The Karate Club is the one that cut into the queue in the first place....."

One of the Drama Club members said that softly, and was greeted with a fierce stare from the orange belt. It felt like he shot a glance at me as well. Fear began to swell up in my heart.

However, Kagurazaka-senpai pushed me aside and stood before the black belt.

"Will the Karate Club take responsibility for any injuries that might occur during our performance?"

"What does that have to do with us? We've already decided to perform more than a hundred different variations of moves, and following our performance will be a talk given by a master. If the Folk Music Research Club wants to join the fray, then you guys will have to end your performance within ten minutes."

"Hold on, don't decide that by yourselves. We've already finished



choosing our script!"

The vagabond interrupted.

"The Folk Music Research Club and Drama Club will have to finish everything within forty minutes! And even with that, we'd still be running really tight on time, given the amount of time we need to prepare!"

"What? You've got to be kidding me!"

"You should've told us you wanted to use the sports hall earlier! We've been preparing for this performance since last year!"

"Why don't you guys perform in the music hall as well? You can fit a larger audience in there."

"The stage isn't designed for plays! Stop talking if you don't know anything! Also, why don't you guys perform in the combative sports center instead?"

"Where the hell is our audience going to come from!?"

"It's not like anyone'll be interested anyway."

"What did you just say!? You asking for a fight?"

Why the hell are you people quarreling in our practice room!? I couldn't find a chance to interrupt them, so I looked around the room once to see if there was anyone who could save us. Just then, I saw Kagurazaka-senpai, who was standing beside me, lick her lips once. Oh god, this person is actually enjoying the atmosphere.

Right when Senpai was about to join the battle, the cymbals behind us suddenly crashed.

I reacted a second slower than the karate guy and the vagabond—who were about to duke it out with each other—as we all turned our heads around in shock.

"Stop stirring up a ruckus in our practice room! Now's not the time for us to be quarreling. We should at least find out how much time each club needs!"

Chiaki stood up furiously behind the drums.

The Drama Club members finally sat themselves down after Chiaki pointed her drumstick at them.

"We definitely need eighty minutes, and that's only for the performance. Preparing the large props will require another ten minutes."

Chiaki then directed her sight to the black belt.

"We need forty minutes for our performance."

There was really no time to spare—even if we excluded the Folk Music Research Club's performance. And we hadn't even factored in the time necessary for preparing and packing up.

"How much time does the Folk Music Research Club want?" asked the Drama Club member exasperatingly, as she crossed her arms in front of her chest.

"There'd never be enough time, even if we multiplied forever by itself. But conservatively speaking, we'd need at least an hour."

Kagurazaka-senpai uttered yet another one of her provocative lines. The two Karate Club members put on a haughty expression and grunted.

"That's definitely unacceptable. Darn, one of you two should just give up already."

"We're talking about the sports hall here, so the cultural clubs should just scram already!"

"What? I don't understand a single word of what you said!"

Another round of meaningless squabble. I stole another glance at Senpai's profile—her face was filled with energy. My intuition told me "Ah, it's about time for her to say it."

"How about this then....."

She didn't yell, but her voice was still penetrating. Everyone that was quarreling stopped and looked at her silently. Senpai then said,

"Let's decide with a competition."



Club activities could generally be split into two broad categories: sports and arts. Taking these concepts a step further, some people even used these categories to differentiate people's personalities as

well.

However, the Drama Club and the music clubs didn't fall so neatly into either of these two categories. Obviously, the two belonged in the "arts" group rather than the "sports" group, but because of their club activities, their members underwent physical training that was comparable to that of the sports clubs. It wasn't something to be underestimated.

It wasn't surprising that the Karate Club had accepted Senpai's proposal, but the Drama Club had actually accepted it as well. Though, in a sense, this situation was something to be expected.

"Let's settle it all on the sports day. It just so happens there's a very appropriate event known as the interclub relay race. Based on the results, the higher-ranked clubs can take away a relative amount of time from the lower-ranked ones. Simple?"

Oi, hold on.....

"You guys are from the arts clubs, right? The relay race will be held separately for the arts and the sports clubs, won't it?"

The Karate Club member shrugged questioningly.

"Don't you worry. Comrade Aihara is a sports committee member."

Senpai patted Chiaki, who was standing at her side.

"We're very flexible about things like this. Other clubs might complain if the Karate Club participates in the arts clubs' race, but no one will say anything if the Drama Club and the Folk Music Research Club participate in the sports clubs' race."

"You guys might be fine with that, but don't decide on behalf of the Drama Club."

"We're okay with that as well."

The vagabond lady said that calmly. Black belt, orange belt and I were all surprised by her statement.

"You people are underestimating the training of the Drama Club! A karate match only lasts about three minutes or so, right? Each of our performances on stage is a battle that lasts an entire hour!"

That was quite the provocation from her, and was enough for everyone to reach a consensus.

After those guys left, Mafuyu, who had been hiding behind Chiaki the whole time, tugged Senpai's sleeves.

"How many people do we need for the relay race?"

"Exactly four. Because it's a 1600 m relay race!"

"..... I-I am participating as well?"

Mafuyu had always just watched from the sidelines during our physical education lessons, so she was obviously taken by surprise by Senpai's statement.

"Comrade Ebisawa is the reason they accepted my suggestion so quickly in the first place."

Senpai patted Mafuyu's head lovingly.

"But I..... will pull everyone down."

I'm also really slow.....

"Don't I always say this? 'The battle was already over before it had even started.'"

Senpai placed her hands on Chiaki's and Mafuyu's shoulder, then looked in my direction with a slight smile on her face.

"Don't worry. They lost the moment they agreed to the competition."



After bidding Senpai goodbye on the way home, the three of us made our way towards the train station. I asked Chiaki,

"You jog in the morning, right?"

"Eh? Yeah, about six kilometers. But I used to do twelve."

"You're a monster," I thought to myself. I then followed up with,

"How early do you start?"

"Six-thirty..... Wait, why? Is Nao planning to join too? Really?"

"Mmm. I may not be able to complete the full course together with you, but I'll try my best to wake up early."

"Whoa! It'll be Nao's fault if it rains tomorrow!"

Shut up. Whatever you say.

Just then, Mafuyu, who was walking on the other side of me, tugged on my sleeve.

"..... Is it because of the relay race?"

"That's one of the reasons."

More importantly, it'd be shameful if both Mafuyu and I were to suffer breathing difficulties while on stage. But that's just too embarrassing to say out loud. Mafuyu stared at the guitar case hanging off my back and mumbled, with an almost inaudible voice,

"Together..... with Chiaki....."

And the day ended like that. I was surprised I actually managed to wake up early on the Monday of the following week.

Six-thirty in the morning. I went to school together with Chiaki for our morning practice. We ran to the staff room to pick up the key to the practice room to drop off our instruments before we started running, but the key wasn't in the key box. Eh?

Chiaki and I then witnessed something unbelievable in the practice room.

"Morning....."

Mafuyu was stretching shyly behind the drums. That was the first time I saw her in her sports attire. Though it's strange of me to say that, since I had already seen her in her swimwear. But her legs were really slender, to the point that it was a bit worrisome.

"W-What's going on here?"

"I am joining the run."

E-Eh?

"Because I can't lose!"

Mafuyu stood up with her face flushed red. She was looking at Chiaki when she said that.

Indeed, this is a fight we can't lose. Our performance time would be reduced to nothing if we lost. But I never would've expected Mafuyu to be this motivated though.

"I wonder if you can keep up with us?" Chiaki said that teasingly,

as she moved her face close to Mafuyu's.

"..... I will do my best."

When we began running, Chiaki entered her devil-trainer mode—perhaps because her hot-blooded sporty personality was boiling. Those eyes of hers looked really scary when she was loudly encouraging the panting Mafuyu. Also, that "Min! On! Fight!!!" cheer of yours is really embarrassing, so can you please stop shouting that already? It's still early in the morning right now, but we're within the vicinity of the school and there are people walking around us!

Not long after, Mafuyu was already fatigued and close to her limit. She was left so far behind she couldn't even see Chiaki's back. If you're wondering how I knew that, it's because I was left far behind as well. Embarrassing, I know.

"You can..... g-go on ahead, I will be..... alright after..... a rest....."

Mafuyu said that choppily, as she squatted down by the roadside. Her back heaved up and down intensely each time she took a breath. I was quite worried when I saw that.

"Are you okay?"

"I am..... fine."

This girl was weak and fragile even before the incident with her fingers. I recalled the time she ran away from home.

"How about I carry you piggyback while I run?"

"You idiot, that would be pointless, wouldn't it?"

"Not at all. I mean, Mafuyu's really light, so I think—it might be better for my training if I carry you piggyback while I run?"

However, I quickly decided against it after picturing it in my mind. That's just too embarrassing. Mafuyu finally lifted herself up by grabbing tightly to my arm.

"Are you serious? Why are you willing to do even that? Is it because you have seen how hardworking Chiaki is?"

"It's not just that."

I waited for Mafuyu to lean on my back before I started walking

again. She was so light, it was worrying.

"Chiaki said she'd be satisfied as long as she could be in the same band as the person she loves. But that won't do."

It might be easier to maintain the status quo.....

But I wished to turn that room into a place filled with passion, a place that pulsed—that could support the music Mafuyu played. But it would've been embarrassing to say that out loud, so all I did was walk silently as I carried Mafuyu on my back.

"..... Did Chiaki really say that to you?"

Asked Mafuyu, next to my ear.

"..... Mmm. She was probably referring to Senpai."

"Idiot."

Mafuyu's weight disappeared from my back all of a sudden. She left my side.

"Hey, start running! Chiaki will get further and further ahead of us if you do not hurry."

And with that, she began sprinting. That back of hers, with her maroon-colored hair fluttering in the air, became smaller and smaller. What's going on here? What's up with her? I followed behind her.

Obviously, not long after, Mafuyu became breathless again, allowing me to catch up from behind. This time, she placed her palms on the asphalt and panted, "Don't worry about me, go! You have to catch up to Chiaki!"

In the end, Mafuyu was harshly scolded by Chiaki—who had actually lapped us—and was forced to run despite her wobbly steps. Given the commotion we were making, I doubt anyone could've guessed which club we were from.

After our lessons, Kagurazaka-senpai abandoned all intentions of band practice and happily began discussing our battle plan.

"I've already decided the running order. The first runner will be Comrade Aihara—because that's the leg in which the chance of contact between runners is highest. Putting the Drama Club aside, the Karate Club may try to pull something on us during the race. It'd be great if we could retaliate by making them fall without needing to

contact their body, using a move like the 'phantom throw.'" <sup>[4]</sup>

"Senpai, judo isn't magic, so there aren't any moves like that."

"Next will be Comrade Ebisawa. You should try your best to be as cute as possible, so that the Karate Club runner won't lay a hand on you. That should allow us to maintain the lead. Then, young man is up next..... Mmm, all you need to do is run. The last runner will be me. Our lead will probably be gone by the time the race gets to that stage, but because I won't have to worry about my back, it'll be easier for me to catch up from behind."

Hey, that's a totally crazy plan! How can she be so optimistic? It was like she didn't even consider the possibility of us losing. I was speechless, as usual.

"Also, we've already decided on the details of the competition."

Senpai spread a copy of the pledge out in front of us, and on it, was incredibly exaggerated prose: {The Drama Club (henceforth referred to as "Party A"), Karate Club (henceforth referred to as "Party B") and Folk Music Research Club (henceforth referred to as "Party C") shall abide to the following conditions—} etc. It was filled with lots of technical terms, and even had the stamps of the festival committee and the student council at the very end.

"Why the formalities....."

"We can't be sloppy about this. It'd be problematic if we had to argue over the legitimacy of the terms and conditions after the race. I left the original copy with the student council. As written in the agreement, the winner can take away ten minutes of performing time for every difference in ranking. For example, if we came in fourth, and the Drama Club, sixth, our performance time would increase by twenty minutes, while theirs would be reduced by the same amount. We also agreed that the other conditions would remain as per what was determined initially, and that none of that would be changed."

"H-Hold on. As per what was determined initially? How much time we were allocated?"

"Hmm? It's written very clearly in here, yeah? According to the timetable planned by the festival committee, the Drama Club will begin their performance at three, which should last about an hour;



next, we'll take over at four and perform until four-twenty. Then, lastly, the Karate Club will start at four-twenty and go all the way till five."

"So we're out of the running if we rank lower than the other two clubs....."

"You don't need to dwell on what might happen if we lose, as we had nothing to lose from the start anyway."

With that said, Senpai slapped me hard on the back.

"To be honest, we're in the most disadvantageous position in the current allocation. The Drama Club is up first, so they can begin their preparations during the masquerade contest; and since a play can't be interrupted halfway, they should be very confident about eating up our twenty minutes. And the Karate Club is up last, meaning there won't be any complaints if they need to extend their performance. Additionally, because we're a band, it'll be easier for them to negotiate the length of our performance. They'll definitely ask us to perform our songs within the restricted amount of time."

"That's just mean," Chiaki smashed the cymbals when she said that.

"So you see, it's impossible for us to lose. We can only win. Isn't that right?"

But Kagurazaka-senpai didn't explain any further. From that day on, Senpai was always late to band practice, and was frequently seen around the teachers and the festival committee members in places like the staff room, student council room and audiovisual room. Perhaps she's plotting something in secret.

We decided to ignore what was going on. Chiaki, Mafuyu and I gathered in the practice room every day at six-thirty to go on our morning run, then participated in morning band practice right after.

Why did Mafuyu wish to join the run as well? Probably because she wants to catch up to a certain someone?

For me, my answer was crystal clear. I wanted to catch up to Mafuyu.

Because I wished to stand on a stage unaffected by time, forever allowing Mafuyu to listen to my music. I wanted her to know that a

dependable rhythm section, worthy of her trust, would always be by her side, pulsating endlessly.

That was my reason for running.

As I welcomed the cold autumn breeze that brushed against my face as I ran, a tune flowed in my mind.

The stretch of road was filled with heroes who had their dreams broken. They gambled everything on the final reckless dash—

Though everyone was planning to escape tonight, there wasn't a single place to hide.

May we try our best to live on with those sorrows in our hearts.....



Multiple gunshots rang throughout the school's sports grounds, which were bathed in the rays of the glaring sun.

The sun, high in the air, was beginning its descent towards the western horizon, and beneath the sun, five sports committee members could be seen redrawing the white lines of the track. I could almost smell the odor of their sweat that had seeped its way into the soil.

October Thirteenth, sports day.

The afternoon marked the end of an intense cheerleading competition, and what came next was a war of attrition. You heard right—a war of attrition.

"Can anyone substitute for the participants in the 400 m race? Four people were injured during the cavalry battle."

"We still have the long-distance race after this, so not us!"

"Quit your excuses and get going! You can run as long as you've got two legs on you!"

Terada, the boss lady of Third Class of First Year, handed those orders down coldly. No one dared to oppose her.

"Boss, we're lacking defensive manpower for the boutaoshi event!"

[5]

"Head to the infirmary and bring back the people that only suffered

minor injuries!"

That's quite inconsiderate and forceful of her. I remembered Senpai saying the school's sports day was like this every year—the cavalry battle and boutaoshi was always held twice, once in the morning and once in the afternoon (the female and male contests); so it was a death march that always ended up with casualties. What the hell was the sports committee thinking?

The fuzzy-sounding speakers were broadcasting an announcement requesting the participants of the interclub relay race to assemble, so I cautiously snuck out of the allocated area of Third Class of First Year.

Kagurazaka-senpai, Chiaki and Mafuyu were already waiting in the southern corner of the participants area; both Chiaki and Mafuyu had already changed out of their cheerleading outfits. The three of them weren't wearing sports attire, but instead, were wearing the feketerigó T-shirt Chiaki had made a long time ago.

That's right, it has always been like this. Senpai had already been carrying out her plans in secret.

Then came a roar from the speakers,

"I am Inoue from the Broadcasting Club—" "and I am Oota from the Track and Field team. We're the live commentators that'll be analyzing today's events."

Why do we have live commentary and analysis for a high school sports day? And who's the target audience anyway? The sports committee members were already getting carried away with their commentary.

"Oota, what's coming up next is the interclub relay race. First up is the race among the sports clubs. However, it seems two of the participating clubs are not actually sports-related." "That's right. Well, since the Drama Club will be performing a drama with sword-fighting scenes, they can be considered to be a relative of the Kendo Club. As for the Folk Music Research Club, I'm not really sure, but I think the musicians will slam their guitars at people during the rock performance, so you can think it as a sort of martial art."

Please don't say whatever comes to your mind, Commentator Oota.

"And a new rule will be incorporated into the interclub relay race from this year onward: clubs will have to wear their respective attires during the race."

That was Kagurazaka-senpai's secret weapon. I looked at the participants gradually gathering in the participants area; in particular, I was looking for members of the Drama Club and the Karate Club.

Obviously, the Karate Club members were wearing their karategi. But they were also barefoot.

The Drama Club was even worse off. Since they had no set attire, they had to follow the rule set forth by the sports committee, which stated that they had to wear what they would be wearing for the performance. That meant the kinagashi, as well as the daishos hanging off their waist.

Honestly speaking, both parties were wearing attire that wasn't exactly suitable for running. Whoa, one of the Karate Club members is staring fiercely in our direction. They must be pretty pissed. Standing in line next to us, the samurai lady from the Drama Club shot a glance at Kagurazaka-senpai while muttering clearly, "How very despicable of you. You sure know how to create trouble for us." Senpai feigned an air of innocence.

The sports committee members were around when Senpai suggested the idea, and obviously, the Karate Club members present among the committee vehemently objected against it. But the sports day could be considered as a festival of sorts, and since it had no bearing on the scores of the interclass competition, priority was given to ideas that could heat up the atmosphere. Additionally, the other clubs that were participating in the event were sport clubs like Football, Baseball and Track and Field—and needless to say, they were unaffected by the proposed idea, so they readily agreed to it.

Senpai knew that would happen—

"But the second runner of the Folk Music Research Club is her. You know, the sheltered Princess, that had never once participated in any of the physical education lessons—"

I was surprised. Mafuyu's nickname has actually spread that far? Also, stop talking about things that'll lower our morale before the race has even begun!

Then again, it was true Mafuyu was the obstacle that totally eliminated all the advantages Senpai had forcefully obtained for us. The Karate Club and Drama Club had probably sent their fastest runners, but we only had four people in our club.

Mafuyu had her maroon-colored hair tied up into a ponytail and was standing in front of me, her back facing me. She then turned her head around. Her navy blue eyes were filled with sincere determination.

"I will definitely pass the baton to you."

Said Mafuyu, as she stared at me.

"I will definitely pass it to you."

I gulped and nodded my head. I was slightly overwhelmed by her determination.

That's right. Now's not the time to complain. The only thing left to do now is run.

"And. Here. Come. The. PARTICIPAAAAAANTS!"

Inoue screamed as he commentated on what was happening. For some unknown reason, the runners ran onto the track in eight rows of four despite the missing background music. The smell of dust and lime burnt my nasal cavity. Cheerleading banners fluttered before our eyes, and the wind carried the sound of the cheers.

The 1600 m relay race was split into four laps, and was held on our school's unbelievably huge 400 m running track. It was a harsh race that would last around five minutes. The runners gathered in front of the VIP seats.

As the first runners positioned themselves, while the starter was carrying the pistol onto the pitch, I turned around and asked Senpai,

"..... Why didn't you tell us about your ploy earlier?"

"Participants will have to wear their respective attires"—the announcement from the sports committee would only be passed down to the president of the club, who was Senpai. We only came to know about the new rule yesterday.

Senpai answered with a faint smile,

"I was watching the three of you run and sweat every morning from

the rooftop. The scene was so incredibly dazzling that I couldn't bring myself to inform you people of my petty tricks."

So you do come to school every morning? Then how about you attend your lessons?

"Moreover, it's not like it's an incredibly huge plan or anything. When the starting gun fires, we can only obtain victory by relying on our hearts and our legs."

"You mean there's nothing else once the race starts?"

I asked weakly. I mean, I *am* worried. I could sense Mafuyu's gaze behind me, staring past my shoulders.

"Yeah, there are no additional strategies. All that's left are things like this."

With that said, Senpai secretly showed me the item in her hand.

It was a minidisc with the label [Offenbach <天国と地獄>]. It was a very well-known piece on its own, but some only recognized it as the jingle used in the [commercial](#) for the pastry chain Bunmeido. In any case, it was a well-known operetta that was incorporated into the standard tracks to be used on sports day..... Wait, what's it doing here? Won't they be using it during the events? <sup>[6]</sup>

"Yeah, I secretly swapped this with some rock music."

When I lifted my head to look at Senpai in surprise, the starting gun fired, and at the exact same time, the fill of the drums began. I turned my head around in shock.

What I saw was the starting line being torn apart by winds of various colors as the runners dashed away. I stared at Chiaki's tiny body as the group of shoving runners approached the very first corner.

What was playing through the speakers was the pure and flawless strumming of a guitar that could bring one to tears; the glamorous sound of the piano followed, and entered the fray together with a series of low drumming sounds, which sounded like the gradually increasing rumbling of the ground. A microphone picked up the conversation between the sports committee members sitting in their reserved seats.

"..... Eh?" "Were we supposed to play this song?"

Next came a hoarse singing that sounded like it was intended to crush that conversation into pieces. It was Bruce Springsteen.

—<Born to Run>

My body subconsciously trembled. How? This song had been playing on and on in my mind for the past two weeks, every time we were on our morning run.

"It has to be this song. Am I right?"

Mumbled Senpai from behind me. I turned around on reflex and stared at her face.

Can she see through everything? Or is that just the song that plays in our mind whenever we want to express our feelings as we run? I guess the latter's probably closer to the truth.

I peered into the cloudless sky. A deep belief in the powers of rock and roll was sprinting within me, causing my blood to burn.

I searched for Chiaki as I scanned the track, and found her when the leading runner reached the first corner—the third runner, with a small white frame, and a pink headband fluttering in the wind. I clenched my fists subconsciously. A group of runners was following closely behind Chiaki, and among them, was a runner in karategi.

Where was the Drama Club? I couldn't find their attention-grabbing attire. How can this be? Where on earth—

The first and second runners were neck and neck with each other, and I was shocked by what I saw. The second runner was the girl from the Drama Club that had spoken to us in a threatening tone. I didn't locate her earlier because I was searching near the back.

So that wasn't just all talk, she's really something. Commentator Inoue was shouting excitedly, "Drama Club! Drama Club's second and following closely behind!"

An earth-ripping roar erupted around us. The leading runner from the Football team had fallen—seems like his leg was hooked by the sword hanging off the Drama Club runner's waist or something. A chill ran down my spine as I looked at the cloud of dust stirred up by the fall. There was a possibility that the runners in the back might get tangled in this mess—

Someone slipped through the chaotic crowd without hesitation and burst her way to the front.

"Chiaki!"

Mafuyu shouted. It was indeed Chiaki. She was sprinting forward in a straight line, ignoring the footsteps of the guys closing in on her. It was as though Bruce Springsteen's powerful voice had given her a push from behind—I could almost see her splattering sweat drops.

The blue attire of the Track and Field runner finally overlapped with Chiaki's small silhouette at the third corner. Mafuyu stood up and turned her head around to gaze at me. I could sense she was feeling overwhelmed by the pressure. We had never expected Chiaki to approach the end point neck and neck with the hot favorites.

"I'll be waiting for you!"

I squeezed that line out with all my might.

"Don't mind those behind you! And don't worry about those in front of you either! It's okay if you're overtaken by others! All you need to do is run towards me!"

"I-I get it!"

The blushing Mafuyu shook her ponytail and began sprinting on the track.

A cheer rang yet again. I lifted my body to look at the forth corner. The leading two runners had come into contact with each other at the elbows. The lighter Chiaki was almost pushed out of the inner lane, but the upper body of the Track and Field member underwent a huge wobble as well.

Chiaki was the one with the faster recovery rate, but the strength of the Track and Field team was indeed something, especially when it came to sprinting down a straight path. They had gained a lead of about a few meters by the time Chiaki passed the baton to the Mafuyu. An amber-colored wind streaked past my sight—Mafuyu's hair was fluttering in the air due to her speed.

"..... Sorry for not taking the lead."

The panting and sweating Chiaki wobbled towards us, then collapsed in Senpai's bosom.



"No, you did incredibly well. That was way beyond my expectations."

Senpai hugged Chiaki tightly. I wanted to say some words of consolation to Chiaki, who was biting her lip bitterly, but I couldn't say anything at all.

I turned my head and saw her maroon hair fluttering gently with the wind, reflecting the rays of the sun along the edge of the track. I slammed my fist against my trembling knees when I saw Mafuyu being overtaken by the runners, one by one. There's no need to be flustered!

The Track and Field team had built a sizable lead—about a half-a-lap distance ahead of the second-place runner. Just then, the dull white silhouette of the karategi closed in on Mafuyu. I was shocked—that guy was reaching his hand towards Mafuyu's hair.

I stood up on reflex. God damn it, what's he trying to do!? Mafuyu strayed off towards the outer lanes of the track, making the Karate Club member miss his grasp.

My mind was filled with prayers. Please come back to us safe and sound, no matter what happens! The runners were approaching the third corner when Mafuyu was overtaken a third time.

"Where do you think you're supposed to be, young man? Get on the track now!"

I was shocked motionless by Senpai's sudden voice. Oh right, what am I doing? I was the next runner.

"You're a guy, so the Karate Club probably won't go easy on you. Be careful."

She hammered my back—

"You don't have to think about anything. We'll win as long as you pass the baton to me."

And with that, she pushed me onto the track. Quite a few of those different-colored batons flashed by me as the runners passed their batons on to the next runner. The Baseball Team, the Drama Club, followed by the Kendo Club. Next was the Karate Club—

Just then, I noticed the third runner of the Drama Club exchange

looks with his counterpart from the Karate Club, who was right next to him. They nodded their heads together.

What's with that? They should be bitter enemies, no?

However, the two of them disappeared from my sight after receiving their respective batons.

I caught sight of Mafuyu in the fourth corner. Her headband was missing, and her hair was messed up because of rushing wind; but she was still running towards me.

I moved a few steps back in the relay zone to match the rhythm of her steps. Then, I began accelerating. Mafuyu was getting closer and closer; the distance between us shrunk by an arm's length with each of her passing steps. I was already in the air the moment I felt the icy touch on my fingers; at the same time, I heard the sounds of the saxophone solo in <Born to Run>.

White lines flowed past my feet at an unbelievable pace. I reached the corner in an instant, and it felt like the centrifugal force pulled me away from the track. The oncoming wind flew into my nose and seared the deepest parts of my brain.

I saw the back of the karategi. It was that orange belt guy. The distance between us had shortened to just an arm's length. He saw me when he turned his head around, and on his face was a twisted expression. Must be painful to run barefooted—his running style looked very unnatural. I'll have to at least get close to the Drama Club after overtaking him. That was the position I wanted to be in when I passed the baton on to Senpai.

I could no longer hear the sounds of my footsteps by the time I reached the second corner—all I heard was the intense thumping of my heart, the wind howling past me, and the sound of Springsteen's guitar. The back of the dirty karategi was getting closer and closer. His running was off and his upper body was trembling. I was certain he would leave the inner lane if his center of gravity shifted outwards during the bend. And so, I had to conserve my energy until that happened—

The wind blew a small rock onto my face, and when I refocused my attention, I saw a narrow gap appear in the inner lane. The Karate Club member was veering towards the outside.

It was only when I slipped into the gap that I realized it was all a trap. But by then, it was already too late.

That orange belt bastard lifted his elbow, then stretched out his leg to knock it against my calf. My vision wobbled, and my body spun half a turn.

The sound of my heartbeat, the wind and the guitar were all engulfed by a scraping noise. My right cheek was assaulted by an unbelievable burning sensation, and feelings of pain and dampness followed. My right hand subconsciously gripped the baton tightly in order to not let go of it.

The orange belt and I were tangled up in a mess as we rolled off the track towards the audience's seats. Next came a series of shrieks.

My consciousness was slowly getting hazy. I swallowed the pungent metallic taste down my throat. And just as I was about to lift my head up, I felt the back of my head come into contact with something.

That orange belt bastard was actually laying on my back. Get off! Get off of me!

"Hey, are you alright? You're bleeding!" "Medic!"

I heard a few voices, but I ignored them all. Don't touch me, the relay race is still ongoing. However, the orange belt bastard grabbed my wrist tightly just as I was about to push myself off the ground.

"..... Y-You!"

Are you really that desperate to stop me using those despicable means of yours? Are you dumb!? I could only watch as the Drama Club runner got further and further away from me. But with someone lying on my body, I was unable to make any sounds; I could only crawl on the ground, dragging the orange belt bastard along with me. I have to get myself back onto the track, even if I can only inch closer one centimeter at a time. My legs were losing strength, and I couldn't push away the weight on my back. I couldn't stand up.

"Get off!" I roared furiously with my feebly soft voice. "We'll both end up losing, so get off!"

That orange belt bastard replied by increasing the strength of his

grip on my wrist. That bastard—

"Nao, stand up."

I heard Chiaki's painful voice. My mind cleared all of a sudden. I realized something.

That was the Karate Club's plan all along—to perish together with Folk Music Research Club. Because we only had twenty minutes of performance time, we'd lose everything if we were last and the Drama Club got anything higher than sixth. With that, they could kick us out of the sports complex. And after that, all they had to do was work out the details and pass the remaining unused time to the Karate Club. So they had formed an alliance in secret and planned all of this. God damn it, to think..... to think that we'll actually lose to these people.

I couldn't shake off the orange belt bastard that clung to my back like a zombie. All I could do was grit my teeth and slither forward like a slug. Far away from us, the Drama Club team was passing their baton on to their last runner—

"Nao—"

Chiaki's voice pierced its way deep into my consciousness.

"It's not too late, so stand up! Min! On! Fight!!! Min! On! Fight!!!"

I lifted my heavy head to accept the voice that had grabbed me and touched my heart.

That's right, I'm still carrying Chiaki, Mafuyu and Senpai on my shoulders. I have to continue running. The weight of this despicable person is nothing compared to the weight of the responsibility on my shoulders—

"Min! On! Fight!!!"

Chiaki's cheers just so happened to overlap with Springsteen's scream.

I mustered all my strength to lift up my shoulders, and pushed myself off the ground. There was a jolt of pain as the wind blew against my face, but for a brief moment, I could feel the singing voice descend onto my eyelids.

——*Someday girl—I don't know when—We're gonna get to*

*that place—Where we really wanna go, and we'll walk in the sun..... But till then, tramps like us—Baby we're born to run.*

We're born to run.

I kicked my feet against the sand, shifted my body weight forward and began to sprint wildly. All that time, I never let go of the baton in my hand. I felt something tumble off my back, but it didn't matter to me anymore. At the end of the corner were a few white lines extending past my feet. I could see the silhouette with black hair standing near the converging point of those lines. Blood and sweat flowed into my eyes, but I did my best to keep them open.

I lifted the baton and stretched my arm out to pass it to her. A resounding feeling passed through my hand. And in the next instant, a crazy strength pulled the baton away from me. My knees collapsed onto the ground amid a cloud of dust.

I could faintly see the two braids fluttering in the air, like the tail feathers of a wild beast as it flapped its wings and flew away from me.



I was sent to the infirmary right after that, so I didn't know the details. But from the commentary and the photos, it was obvious the whole incident had stirred up quite a ruckus.

Terada, the female boss of Third Class of First Year, was someone that lacked any sense of compassion, so I was forced to leave the infirmary bed to participate in the final boutaoshi event in the afternoon. Moreover, during the event, I was given the most difficult task of supporting the beam. It was a miracle I even managed to stand on my feet during the closing ceremony.

The school gave us the next day off so we could rest. Since my body was aching all over, I spent the whole day in bed.



It wasn't until Tuesday that my body had recovered enough for me to barely play my bass.

When I stepped into the classroom, I found the sight of all the guys

of our class—covered up in band-aids, medicinal plaster and bandages—to be incredibly eye-catching. They were probably all drilled hard by Tyrant Terada.

I wasn't sure if it was worth the sacrifices, but I had heard that the Third Class team (the groups for sports day were formed by grouping the same class number of each year together to form eight teams) had obtained first place—while second place had gone to the First Class team Kagurazaka-senpai belonged to. The upper brass of our class was very pleased with that result, as it could've been considered revenge for the chorus contest. As for me, I spent the rest of the day in a weakened state.

"..... Does our school have a policy about changing classes....."

Murmured one of the guys during our lunch break, which made me cognizant of a horrifying truth: the sports day for the next two years will probably be just as crazy as this year's.....

As for Mafuyu, she was very concerned about the graze on my cheek.

"Are you feeling better? Chiaki said you had a fever."

"Ah, yeah. Ouch! It hurts. Don't touch my injury for now."

Chiaki even came to my house yesterday to take care of me. But the so-called "looking after me" was actually just her buying lunch from the convenience store to satiate Tetsurou, who had been continuously complaining "I'm hungry, I'm hungry." That simple help, though, allowed me to sleep properly.

"Mmm, but Nao worked really hard!"

Chiaki hammered my shoulder happily. Stop. That really hurts.

"..... Urm, I don't really know the details of the results, so what exactly happened during the competition? How much performance time do we have?"

Despite Senpai's speed, we didn't manage to close the distance between us and the Drama Club, resulting in them reaching the finish line first. However, Chiaki and Mafuyu remained silent after exchanging a few looks. So what exactly happened?

"Ask Kyouko." Mafuyu replied coldly. "Kyouko must be dying to

explain it all herself."

"Yeah. Senpai will be disappointed if we tell you everything."

I could only wait for school to end as I wondered what on earth had happened.

With the sports day being over, our school began to focus on the school festival. Everywhere—including in the corridors and in the courtyard—the sounds of planks being hammered and sawed could be heard, and the smell of paint lingered in the air.

While making our way to the practice room together, the three of us met Kagurazaka-senpai at the door of the practice room. Before I could even say anything, Senpai had already grabbed me tightly by the right hand and caressed the injury on my face. She looked at me with slightly teary eyes..... Eh? Urm, what's going on here?

"I still cannot forget the moment I received the baton from you. What a numbing sensation that was. You actually suffered so many injuries for my sake."

"No, I didn't do it especially for Senpai..... Ow, Mafuyu, that hurts! Stop pinching me! And you stop too, Chiaki!"

Mafuyu started pinching my injured cheek, so Chiaki decided to join in, and started prodding it as well. I squat down in the middle of the girls and protected my face by shielding it with my arms.

"What are you girls doing? Please, stop doing such things to me. I'm injured, you know?"

Mafuyu put an unhappy expression on her face, and Chiaki stuck her tongue out at me with a "Bleh." As for Senpai, she just opened the door with a laugh, and pushed us all into the room.

"Did I mention this already? We ranked sixth in the relay race."

Said Senpai nonchalantly, as she took her Les Paul guitar out of its case. I guess the Karate Club was last, but wouldn't that make us seventh? Did I overtake someone? After that fall?

"Well..... who was seventh? It couldn't have been the Drama Club, right?"

"The Kendo Club was seventh—I have to praise them for their tenacity. The Drama Club was fifth."

Ah, I see. Senpai's ploy had ensured that the Kendo Club would definitely be overtaken by us, since they had to run in their protective gear. I only found out later that their last runner had dropped the baton by accident as well. Can't blame them, since they had to wear kote as well.<sup>[7]</sup>

Which meant, we could claim twenty minutes of the Karate Club's time, but would have ten minutes taken from us by the Drama Club, resulting in a net gain of ten minutes.

"This victory was obtained with the help of everyone, and not just me alone."

Kagurazaka-senpai opened her arms wide and pulled Mafuyu's and Chiaki's heads beside her, then planted a kiss on their cheeks. It was only at times like that that Mafuyu would put on a bashful expression without offering any resistance. No, wait a second. Why's she so happy? Her smile suggested that we had actually obtained a huge and comprehensive victory.

"Well..... even so, we can only perform for thirty minutes, no?"

"No no no."

After connecting her guitar to the amplifiers, Senpai turned around and flashed me a "V" sign.

"It's two hours."

"..... What?" What did she just say?

"You see, since the Karate Club had come in last, their performance time was reduced to zero, meaning their time would be shared between us and the Drama Club. Oh right, you all should take another look at the pledge letter. Here."

Senpai showed us the photocopied document and pointed at a certain line.

*'We agree that the other conditions will remain as per what was determined initially, and that nothing will be changed'*

"..... What does that line have to do with this?"

"You still don't get it? The other conditions cannot be changed. Meaning, the Drama Club can use the time they take away from the Karate Club only after our performance is over."



"Ah....."

My jaws dropped in surprise. What kind of trickery is that? W-Will the Drama Club really agree to that?

"That's why I made this pledge letter and had the student council witness the whole thing. The Drama Club did complain a lot though. The additional time was useless to them if it couldn't be combined with their initial performance time. But since we're right smack in-between the two blocks, it doesn't make a big difference to us if the schedule proceeds as initially planned. I didn't make a single concession to them."

"Urm..... so how did things go? It can't be that the Drama Club just accepted this, right?"

"No way. Actually, I had already booked the audiovisual room at three in the afternoon for the Drama Club. Not many people know the room has a complete set of lighting equipment in it. Actually, I had considered that as a backup plan in case we failed, but I didn't tell you people about it because I didn't want to dent your enthusiasm. That place isn't as spacious as the sports complex though."

I recalled how I had seen Senpai in many different places. So she was actually taking care of stuff like this?

No, hold on.....

"But..... I-I mean, their ranking was higher than ours, no? Didn't they say something like 'Why doesn't the Folk Music Research Club use the audiovisual room instead?'" What sorcery did she use to make them accept such a concession?

"Mmm, they did say that to me. But they shut up immediately when I started mumbling about how they had teamed up with the Karate Club to interfere with your race. Rather than my trickery, it was that incident that actually allowed us to deal the decisive blow."

So she knew all along.....? That's quite sharp of her.

"That's why those injuries are your badge of honor. I'm very proud of them."

Senpai gently caressed my cheek again, causing me to shiver.

What a scary person she was. Everyone's *modus operandi* was well within her grasp. Thank god I'm standing on the same side she is.

I finally understood the totality of Senpai's plan. We only had to beat at least one of the clubs to get them both kicked out of the sports complex. Because the amount of time taken was decided by the difference in rankings, it was highly likely that the club that came in last would have all their time taken away from them. And with that, Senpai could use the trap she had set in the pledge letter to negotiate with the other party—requesting even more time in exchange for changing the schedule of performances. But despite how cunning she is, she probably didn't expect things to turn out like this. The Folk Music Research Club had obtained total victory without losing anything.

..... Meaning to say..... Eh? A resounding victory? That means our performance time will be—

"With that, we're the only ones left standing on the piece of scorched earth. And that means—"

Senpai flashed another "V" sign.

"We have two whole hours."

"Two....."

It took me a while to process what Senpai said.

"—Two hours? Nonstop?"

"Of course. Just like we had initially planned. I mean, we're still young."

"No, no way, that's impossible. It's not like we're a band on drugs! Two hours!?"

"I'm looking forward to it!" "How about we perform an opera?" "I hate operas. I would prefer a suite."

The three of you, listen to me!

"Right, in order to be able to play for two consecutive hours..... Nao, come here. Let's start with push-ups—"

"That's right. And this time, you'll have to train until you can do them with all three of us sitting on your back."

"Stop messing around with me! Also, are we really going to use the whole two hours?"

A series of tumbling sounds followed. Mafuyu placed bundles of scores—that she had been hugging in her chest—on the bass amplifiers between us. Seems like she borrowed all these from the music preparatory room.

"There are a whole bunch of scores I want to play. Two hours is not enough."

The three girls began selecting scores based on their preferences, and for a while, I could only stare at the scene in a dumbfounded state.

I glanced at the calendar on the wall. Only a month left till the school festival.

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## Notes

1. Min-on's short for their band, as mentioned in chapter 4 vol 2
2. Fill-in is a sort of drumming technique or something, not sure if named similarly in English
3. Daisho wiki link [here](#). Google for the image of kinagashi
4. SF2 Guile's glitch.
5. [棒倒し](#)
6. 天国と地獄 (Heaven and Hell) is Japanese's unofficial name for [<Orphée aux enfers>](#), and it's most notably recognized for and linked to its can-can part in Japan. Parodied into countless MAD and stuff such as [this](#)
7. Kote's the gauntlets of Kendo wear.

# Chapter 4 - Connected Names

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There were quite a few picture frames illustrated on the jacket sleeve of the album.

The three most prominent frames were titled <THE GNOME>, <THE SAGE> and <THE OLD CASTLE>—but all three of them were empty. An additional frame in the bottom left, however, encased the title of the album.

<PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION>.

I removed my headphones with a sigh, then placed the CD back into its case before stacking it atop a mountain of different <Pictures at an Exhibition> CDs.

I wanted to yell in frustration. Why are there so many renditions of the same song?

"Allow me to explain. Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky, one of the many musicians who strove to express Russia's musical nationality, was someone that always abandoned his compositions halfway through. Just look at his operas as an example—nearly all of them are incomplete works. However, his ideas of music were innovative and colorful. And many people are attracted to his works precisely because they 'are not perfect.' His masterpiece, <Pictures at an Exhibition>, managed to stir the imagination of countless past and present musicians, which is why so many different variations of the piece exist!"

"..... Tetsurou, why did you barge into my room without my permission?"

"I was just wondering..... if I don't speak like a music critic once in a while, will all that knowledge disappear someday?"

"Whatever, get out."

"Feel free to depend on me if you're fretting about music, yeah? Because I don't help with any of the housework at all."

"If you're aware of that, at least wash our clothes!"

"I don't know the difference between washing powder and wheat flour—are you really fine with that?"

I threw my pillow at Tetsurou to chase him away, then faced the desk and began inspecting the songs on the CDs, one at a time.

The piano rendition composed by Rimsky-Korsakov; the famous orchestral version by Ravel; Henry Wood's version that dated back much earlier; and Tomita Isao's synthesized rendition. These were just a few of the many different interpretations of <Pictures at an Exhibition>.

In the end, I returned to the rendition I had been listening to earlier—the live performance by Emerson, Lake & Palmer. God knows how many times I've listened to this already.



The first to speak was Mafuyu. It happened during our club activities earlier that day. Mafuyu picked a score out from a huge stack of sheets and opened it.

"One of the main themes of <Pictures at an Exhibition> is <Promenade>. If we insert that theme in-between our songs, we can create a complete medley."

"*Pro*..... What does that *pro*-whatever song sound like?" Chiaki lifted her head and asked Mafuyu. Mafuyu grabbed her guitar silently and played a sample of the main theme in B ♭ major.

"Ah, I've heard that before."

"Comrade Ebisawa hasn't released <Pictures at an Exhibition>, right?" asked Kagurazaka-senpai. She was obviously referring to the piano version. Mafuyu nodded her head slightly after a brief moment of silence.

"I'm looking forward to it then. I absolutely must hear Comrade Ebisawa's rendition of Mussorgsky, even if it's performed with a different instrument. Well then, young man, thanks for this—"

"Eh?"

"I'll leave the composing to you."

"Why?"

"I can't believe you're asking me why."

Senpai inched towards me and lifted my chin with her finger. Her black eyes appeared before me and looked like the starless skies of the night. I couldn't move any part of my body, much less my face.

"You're my other half, my dearest Paul. Is there a need for any other reason?"

"Eh..... U-Uh....."



"I didn't expect you to not know that. Guess I have no other option but to lock you in a hotel room to let you know just how much I treasure you."

"Geez—Senpai!" "You can't!"

Chiaki performed a triangle choke on Senpai and pulled her away from me. At the same time, Mafuyu strangled me from behind and pulled me towards the side of the entrance. That's painful. Why has everyone not been giving a damn about my neck recently.....

"Now's not the time to be doing things like this! The school festival's only a month away!"

Senpai became a little depressed after that scolding from Chiaki, but she immediately straightened herself out.

"Sorry, I've reflected on it. So let's all go to the hotel together."

"You used that gag last month, no?"

"Mmm, mmm."

Looks like Chiaki has improved considerably..... Please continue to tsukkomi Senpai in my stead.

"But you don't hate <Pictures at an Exhibition> do you, young man?"

"Hmm? Not really....." Don't veer back on topic all of a sudden. "I don't actually hate it."

I'll be the one composing it? I took the score from Mafuyu's hands and stared at the floor.

"That's settled then. Please compose a medley that is irritatingly long, but also so exciting that our audience won't have a chance to catch their breath."

I hugged my head in response to Senpai's unreasonable request.

When I returned home, I searched through Tetsurou's music collection and dug out all the renditions of <Pictures at an Exhibition> I could find. After that, I brought out a synthesizer as well—it was the one that Tomo had given Senpai, and that Senpai had subsequently lent to me for an unspecified amount of time. I tried playing the <Promenade> theme using various timbres.

<Promenade>.

The theme invoked the image of a leisurely walk through an exhibition. It appeared six times throughout the entire piece, during



the various variations, and brought about a strange sense of uniformity to the song.

That was what Mafuyu was referring to. As long as <Promenade> appeared in-between our songs, any song could be added to the exhibition.

Her argument might've sounded a bit forced, but I did agree with it in general—the melody did leave a lasting impression on the ears. Though I had no idea why it sounded so easygoing despite the alternating 5/4 and 6/4 beats and the intense irregular tempo.

Regardless, I didn't really like Mussorgsky's piano version of <Promenade>. It had way too many unreasonable sustained tones, which made it sound as though he had forcefully recomposed an orchestral piece into a piano piece. Especially that finale.

If I were composing it, I would use the organ, or some similar instrument, to play a resounding cry—like the way it was done in <GNOMES>, with the unison of the bass and drums—

I then realized something—the desired timbres in my mind were being conveyed through my headphones. I had unconsciously replayed the album by Emerson, Lake & Palmer.

I sighed, then turned off the audio and tossed the CD onto my desk. The mountain of <Pictures at an Exhibition> CDs tumbled and fell onto my bed.

That won't do. If that's how it is, I might as well as just copy their performance.

I grabbed my cellphone to give Senpai a call, but decided against it in the end.

I was about to tell her I couldn't come up with anything—but that would've been really embarrassing.

All the songs previously played by feketerigó had been composed by Senpai. So why doesn't Senpai compose the song this time around as well? Why does she want me to do it? Perhaps she thinks I'm adept at composing classical pieces just because I'm the son of a music critic? Mafuyu would've been a much better choice if that was what she thought.

What should I do? The music of EL&P continued to reverberate in

my ears.



On Wednesday, we had a rare guest visit our house. It was already late into the night when I finished practicing at Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store, and when I arrived back home, exhausted, I saw a large foreign car parked in our garage.

"Wow....."

I recognized the car straight away because it was my fourth time seeing it. And for a brief moment, I seriously contemplated staying the night at Chiaki's house.

I opened the door silently, and what greeted me was the loud, blaring Shostakovich, and the occasional uncouth quarreling of two middle-aged men.

"..... that's why I say the fugue should continue on all the way till the exposition! How long are you gonna emphasize the voices? You're blindly following Shostakovich's orchestration—the instruments are scattered all over! This is far from the standards of the original."

"That was all that was needed from The Symphonic Brass of London to make the piece shine! It is not like they do that only during Shostakovich. Most importantly, the conflicting inner voices in the most important part of the final movement—"

"Don't be surprised if the concertmaster deliberately refuses to show up after quarreling with you. It'd be your fault for insisting to stick to the same tone as the American orchestras."

"Stop pretending like you know everything!"

"May I know what you two are quarreling about.....?"

Ebichiri and Tetsurou—who were about to engage in a brawl—were shocked when I stepped into the living room. The two of them quickly tidied themselves up and sat down on the sofa. A clear and thick string adagio was playing over the speakers. I knew immediately it was a live performance conducted by Ebichiri.

"Sorry for intruding despite the late hour."

Ebichiri greeted me with a wry expression on his face. I nodded my head slightly in response.

"..... Urm, do you want a cup of coffee?"

I was pretty sure Tetsurou hadn't offer our guest a drink.

"Ah, that is unnecessary. Actually, I am here to speak with you."

..... Again?

"Urm, but it'd be rude of us to not offer you anything. It'd be better if I got you a drink."

I slipped into the kitchen and tried to calm myself down as I washed my hands. Well, Ebichiri's a busy man, so I don't think he's here to pick a fight with Tetsurou. Meaning, he's here to talk about something related to Mafuyu. "But what exactly? Did I do something wrong?" I tried to jolt my memories as I lit the gas to heat the water.

"—He is a really considerate boy. Are you sure he is your son? Could he be the son of Misako and some other man?"

Ebichiri, I can clearly hear what you're saying. He was surprisingly dense when it came to certain things—something that could also be clearly seen with Mafuyu.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but he carries 50% of my genes."

Tetsurou, please don't answer him with such a disgusting reply.

As a small revenge on my part, I served them both cups of incredibly thick coffee, but both of them just drank it down indifferently. That's no fun!

After putting his cup down, Ebichiri looked at me with his stern poker face and said,

"Thank you for last time. I am really grateful for that."

"..... Eh? Huh? What are you thanking me for?" I didn't remember doing anything that deserved his gratitude.

"You brought Mafuyu to the concert, didn't you? That was her first time ever attending one of my concerts. She followed you there, didn't she?"

"Ah. Urm, well....."

So that's what he was thanking me for. But I didn't bring her there;

Mafuyu had obtained the tickets on her own, for whatever reason.

"I kind of forced Flaubert to perform at that concert, but Mafuyu seemed pretty happy because of that..... Speaking of which, I have talked to Flaubert a few times since then."

"Eh? Ah, yeah."

"He too, talks about you all the time. You are..... a really unfathomable person."

I-Is that so?

"Oi, wait a second. Is the Flaubert you're talking about Julien Flaubert? What the heck? Nao, you've actually met him? Where? Where is he right now?"

Tetsurou suddenly pulled himself close to me, his eyes blinded by the prospect of cash.

"Can you hook me up with an exclusive interview with him? The editor-in-chief has been hounding me for that—even photos are okay! Damn, I shouldn't have bragged about being able to snag the interview using my network and contacts."

"Shut up Tetsurou!" "Do not bring your dirty work into this conversation!"

Tetsurou was retorted by the both of us yet again; but he didn't back down this time.

"Hey! Quit joking with me! What do you think allowed me to raise Nao to be the fine person he is today—"

"You said you were the industry's ruffian, no?" "It's because you're the industry's ruffian!"

"B-Being the industry's ruffian is not a sleazy job, okay!? We don't manipulate strings behind backs to do bad stuff, like control the middleman in charge of introducing talents to the orchestras. And we don't act as spies for the College of Music either. It's true! Nao, why are you looking at me with such a cold stare!?"

It's pointless, Tetsurou. Your voice is starting to sound strange. Just be quiet and give it a rest.....

"Uhhhh, that's mean of you, treating me like some sort of shady person!"

With that, Tetsurou grabbed his cup and ran to the kitchen in tears. Ebichiri let out a deep sigh when he saw Tetsurou's sorry state, then took a sip of coffee.

"Well, just the image of Flaubert is enough for a magazine to sell like hot cakes, so I can understand why they are desperate to locate his whereabouts..... I think you should already know this, but please do not disclose anything about him to anyone else."

I nodded my head. Yuri probably dislikes being chased around by the Japanese media and being the subject of baseless articles.

"You might have heard from Flaubert or Mafuyu already, but I guess I will tell you just in case..... Mafuyu is preparing herself for her comeback."

I kept my gaze on the cup in Ebichiri's hands.

Her comeback.

Mafuyu was slowly returning to that glamorous but cold world.

"Please keep this to yourself, as Mafuyu hates the media. The things she was involved in were not pleasant, and I do not intend for her to be harassed either. But the industry is a small world, so I know keeping it a secret forever is quite impossible. In fact, some people are already looking into her return."

"..... Right."

"I have no idea what on earth happened, but her fingers have almost completely healed, which is a miracle. Early last month, her fingers suddenly were no longer numb. The doctors were surprised as well, but because the immobility in her fingers was caused by something psychological..... it is highly possible that her recovery is psychological as well."

Miss Maki had said the same thing in early October.

And I think Yuri's return was the biggest reason for that change.

"Though she is unable to hold concerts for now, she will be releasing an album. The record company is already all geared up for that. Her comeback album will probably be Beethoven's violin sonata."

My shoulders flinched.

Generally speaking, a violin sonata is written for a piano and a violin, and is composed of various movements.

I see—that's what it was all about.

But I still couldn't help but ask him something I already knew the answer to.

"..... She'll be performing with Yuri, right?"

I was surprised by how cold my voice was. I couldn't bring myself to look at Ebichiri's face.

"Of course, since the idea did not materialize back in America. The producers are really gunning hard for their success, and the two of them seem pretty enthusiastic about it as well."

That combination should be a popular one. There's lots of things to talk about, and even I want to listen to their performance. That's quite the pleasant news. And so?

Why are you here to see me?

"Therefore, I would like to ask you—you see, I have never seen Mafuyu practice the piano at home."

"..... Oh."

So that's what he's here for? You should know without even needing to ask me, yeah?

"I think she practices in the school's music preparatory room or something?"

Though I don't think those practices are enough, as it's said that professional pianists need to spend at least six hours a day playing the piano, or else they'll die like a fish out of water. Knowing this, she might be practicing even more in someplace unknown to both Ebichiri and me.

"I..... see."

Ebichiri let out a sigh and relaxed the expression on his face.

"That is good. No, you might find it strange to see me acting like this, but—I just cannot believe it. That Mafuyu is willing to pick up the piano once more."

Well, the same goes for me.

"I guess it's all thanks to Yuri?"

"No—"

Ebichiri stared intensely at my face for some reason. It seemed like he was hesitating on what to say. After a long period of silence, he finally shifted his gaze to his knees.

"..... I do not know. That girl never tells me what she is thinking."

She did reveal quite a lot of things to me, but those bits comprise just a tiny part of the whole picture. Even now, I still don't quite understand her very well. I guess I'm just too stupid.

"However, she began talking to me after she transferred to that school."

A faint smile appeared on Ebichiri's lips as he continued mumbling,

"I had initially planned to transfer her to a high school that was affiliated with the College of Music, with the hope that she would become motivated by the pianos surrounding her. But Mafuyu was strongly against the idea. Come to think of it, it was a blessing I did not force her to transfer. I feel—I am really glad to have enrolled her in your school."

I nodded my head in silence. When I heard those words from him, my feelings settled down.

"But in the near future, she will probably be frequently applying for leaves away from school."

I lifted my head in shock when I heard that.

"She will become busier and busier because of her piano practices, as well as her recordings. And though she is still rejecting the interviews now, that is not something she can do forever. It will turn out the same as before if she continues to reject all interviews....."

A troubled expression appeared on Ebichiri's face. The same expression was probably on my face as well.

"This time around, she is the one that wants to do this, but I have no idea if that is something good or bad. She may not even have time to attend school."

Somehow, I could see my heart thumping at my feet.

Mafuyu's going to stop coming to school. But this isn't the same as before—she's the one making the decision this time around.

Despite it being something that had a good chance of happening, the very thought had never once crossed my mind. And when she returns back to that world, she'll disappear from mine.

Mafuyu is about to leave.

After that, all I did was answer Ebichiri's questions absent-mindedly. I had no idea when he left the house, but when I came to, I found that I was all alone in the living room, slumped on the sofa. The music of the strings, coming from the record in Tetsurou's study, sounded very far away.



The next day, I headed straight to the music preparatory room after school. Miss Maki had not only loaned me the keys earlier, but had also given me permission to look through all the scores on the shelves.

Tetsurou's study was better stocked in terms of genres, but no one could find the different scores (aside from Tetsurou himself) since he never tidied his room properly.

I spread the staff papers out on the desk and placed my bass on my knees, then began to look through the pile of scores. However, I didn't have the will to move my right hand, which was holding the mechanical pencil.

I tossed the pencil away.

Class preparations for the school festival would start at four-thirty, but I planned on skipping, since the Folk Music Research Club had practice at four-thirty in the studio. I had originally planned to come up with something before practice, but my brain was filled with nothing but thoughts of Mafuyu playing the piano.

I suddenly thought—what if I get Mafuyu to help me out with the piano or the synthesizer on stage—

Wouldn't I be able to keep Mafuyu around with that? What if I get her to play the piano as part of the band?



I had jotted my ideas down on staff paper when I was fiddling with the synthesizer at home. The synthesizer was cultivated by Tomo's very own hands, so it was well stocked with all sorts of sound effects—almost all the sound effects utilized in the movies could be found in that unit alone.

If we could use that synthesizer onstage; if Mafuyu were willing to play the piano for me—if that happened, then any song..... or even something as extravagant as including guitars in EL&P's <PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION >—

I shook my head and tore the staff paper into shreds, then rolled all the pieces up and threw them away.

It's about time I move away from EL&P and Mafuyu's piano.

Even if she intended to pick up the piano once more, there was no way she was willing to play the piano underneath the spotlights just for my sake. That's something I've known for a long time already, right? I shouldn't even be thinking about keeping her by my side..... Though I hadn't yet asked Mafuyu what her plans were.

Then, my train of thought suddenly came to a halt. I couldn't think any further.

I heard the sound of the door opening, and as I turned my head around, my eyes crossed with a pair of navy blue eyes.

"Ah....."

I stood up in a hurry. Mafuyu walked in silently and looked at the messy scores, the notebook and the pencils that were on the desk. She then asked,

"..... Sorry, am I interrupting you?"

"Nah, I'm not making much progress anyway. Are you going to practice the piano?"

Mafuyu nodded stiffly. I had been using the piano chair, so I tidied up the scores, then stood up and decided to head somewhere else. Being with Mafuyu was making me feel a little nervous.

Mafuyu tugged the hem of my shirt just as I was about to leave.

"..... Urm, why are you stopping me?"

"You do not have to leave."

"But!"

"L-Look, it is not like I am deliberately trying to hide from you the fact that I am playing the piano again."

Mafuyu covered the lower half of her blushing face with her scores, then looked up to peek at my expression.

"I had intended to tell you after I had practiced a bit, and had become good at it again. If possible, I wanted to tell you after the recordings were finished."

"..... With Yuri?" I wondered why I asked her that question.

"M-Mmm. Urm, but....."

"No, it's fine. It's not like I really mind," I lied. "This is the only place at school you can practice, yeah? I'll head back to the classroom after I finish selecting the scores."

"You can sit to the side and listen."

There was no way I could leave after hearing that from her. As I sat myself down at the desk, Mafuyu began playing the Hanon etudes in various octaves. I stared intensely at Mafuyu's back as she sat at the piano. I was overcome with an inexplicable feeling as I watched her maroon-colored hair sway along with the steady rhythm.

The first thing that came to my mind when I thought about the characteristics of the pianist Ebisawa Mafuyu, was the uniform strength she exerted on all her fingers on both hands. A certain critic had likened it to "breeding pearls of the exact same size." I didn't quite like the way he put it, but I understood what he was trying to convey.

After listening to her at such a close distance however, I realized her right hand was slightly weaker when it came to the high notes. Those were the three fingers Mafuyu had once lost.

However, I probably only managed to pick that out because I had specifically listened for it. If I had immersed myself in the music, like an intricate toy powered by flowing water, and drifted along with the rapidly rising octaves, I would definitely not have recognized she had taken a two-and-a-half-year break.

Just then, Mafuyu suddenly stopped practicing.

"I-It will be better—" Mafuyu turned around and looked at me, "if you do not stare at me. It is hard for me to play like this."

"Eh....."

Then..... off I go. With that said, I walked past Mafuyu, only to find her tugging at my shirt yet again.

"You do not have to leave."

What the heck is this? I have no idea what you want from me. I sighed, then made my way back to the desk and turned the chair away from Mafuyu. This time around, she played phrases that required her to stretch her tiny hands to a tenth. That's really impressive. [Editor note: It refers to distance between her thumb and pinkie while playing the piano; they are ten piano keys apart.]

Her piano sounded almost as beautiful as it used to. Her long break from the piano might be noticeable when playing a certain piece or two, but—

Mafuyu will be leaving soon.

That realization of mine was much more pressing and real than any of the sentences Mafuyu had just said. This time around, she wasn't running away to a certain place by herself—she was soaring back into the world she belonged in, with her healed wings.

So I no longer have any reason to stop her.

None? No reason at all? Is that really true?

If Mafuyu leaves—even though I wish to stay by Mafuyu's side—but if Mafuyu really leaves, then I—

"..... Naomi?"

I flinched in surprise and stood up on reflex. Turning my head around, I saw Mafuyu standing behind me—she had moved there without me noticing. Her head stretched out to look at the staff papers in my hand.

"Eh. A-Ah..... Y-Yes?" I accidentally let out a strange voice.

"There is no progress in your composition?"

I covered the empty staff papers in a hurry, even though it was

already too late.

"..... Mmm."

"Is there anything I can do to help? I can play any song you want me to."

"Eh, ah, no....."

I was really happy she was willing to do that for me, but it just felt worse when I once again remembered she could play the piano.

Speaking of which, all I have to do is to ask, no? If she's returning to her career as a professional pianist, and if she resumes her performances—

What is she planning to do with the band?

But I couldn't bring myself to ask. I was afraid of Mafuyu's answer.

"I can play the original version, or even Rimsky-Korsakov's interpretation if you want me to. It's okay even if it is impromptu."

"No—" I sighed. I can't focus on <PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION> right now, but I can't remain stuck either.

"I haven't sorted out my thoughts yet, so I have no idea what I should be doing right now."

"Kyouko mentioned that a rock band had performed <PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION> before. But I guess you already knew about that?"

"Are you talking about Emerson, Lake & Palmer? They're the reason I'm stuck!"

"Stuck?"

"Regardless of what I do, my composition always ends up as a copy of their version of <PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION>."

"And that is not okay?"

I looked at Mafuyu's face in surprise.

"I guess..... not?" I grabbed the scores for the original <PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION>. "Because I have no understanding of Russia's musical nationality. I had spent a whole night researching it once before, but that was only because I had received a job to write about it. And it's not like I've seriously studied

music composition before. This..... This is something born out of mimicking what I've heard from someone else—how can I possibly compose something good using this?"

"How do you know if you do not try?"

I shook my slumped head.

"This is nothing more than an inferior copy. I have no idea why Senpai delegated this job to me. Are you interested in trying this, Mafuyu? Not only have you played this piece before, you're also much more knowledgeable than me when it comes to Mussorgsky, isn't that right?"

I voiced my thoughts out as I stared at my hands, but noticed Mafuyu was clenching her fist. What greeted me when I lifted my head was Mafuyu's face filled with anger. She said,

"That has nothing to do with what you have in your hand! You should be the one to compose this!"

"Didn't I tell you already? Whatever I compose will end up being nothing more than the rock version of the original melody. I mean, that's all I've been listening to up till now! I've only listened a little bit of the classical piece."

"Isn't that fine!?"

Mafuyu slammed her palm hard on the empty staff papers, causing me to nearly fall out of my chair in shock. I straightened myself up and looked at her.

"You really have no idea why Kyouko assigned that job to you?"

Mafuyu's navy blue eyes were staring straight at me, and all I could do was shake my head absent-mindedly and reply,

"..... I really don't..... know....."

Because I can't tell when Senpai's joking and when she's serious. Mafuyu lowered her gaze. Her shoulders were trembling nonstop.

"It is..... It is because of you that I....."

My chest was assaulted by a sudden surge of pain. As I took in a huge gulp of air—because I couldn't convey my words properly—the door opened all of a sudden, as though someone had banged against it.

"Yeah, they're here! Both of them!"

There were two people at the door—Chiaki and Class-rep Terada. The sight of the two of them caused me to forget everything, including the words I was just about to say, and the reason I was in that room.

"..... What's with that attire of yours?"

Chiaki and Terada were both dressed in very feminine black dresses with plenty of frills—similar to what Yuri had worn during his live performance. Both of them had even put on the headbands as well.

"You have no idea what's happening because you always skip out on the festival preparations, isn't that right? It looks like our class is doing a Gothic café."

"Sorry, I never heard about that."

"And Nao will be the waiter," Terada added.

"Now that's something new!"

"It's your fault for not being around during the poll! Come here, we'll be measuring your size. Put this on right now!"

She tossed a black object at my face. When I opened it, I realized it was a half-apron and a vest. So the costumes are all ready huh.....

"Also, to the Princess over there, who's acting like she has nothing to do with what's happening here—you're a waitress as well."

"E-Eh!?"

Mafuyu was just as surprised as me when Terada shoved a goth lolita dress into her arms.

"Nao, you'll be changing in the corridor. We'll be helping the Princess change in here."

"This dress isn't something you can wear on your own on your very first try, so let me teach you how to do it." Chiaki's eyes were sparkling all of a sudden. I was pushed into the corridor before I could even say a word.



Thanks to that additional burden, we were forced to skip our band practice. We had to work on the interior decorations of the café, and had to come up with a menu after class. Whenever I had time, I would spread the staff papers out and stare at them, then sink into despair. Even if I made it to the practice room, I could only practice by myself. We couldn't practice together because I hadn't finished my composition yet.

I found it pathetic I was feeling slightly relieved about the situation. I definitely wouldn't be thinking so deeply about this if I hadn't talked to Mafuyu. In fact, if not for her, I'd probably be trying to run away from all this.

It seemed that the First Class of Second Year would be performing <Romeo and Juliet> at the sports complex. Senpai, being one of the main characters of the play, was extremely busy because of rehearsals, so she could only show up for band practice after six. Additionally, Mafuyu and Chiaki were stuck helping with our class's preparations, so they also couldn't come down for practice.

"It feels like the role of Juliet doesn't suit Senpai one bit....."

"That's why our script is based off of <West Side Story>. The Juliet I'm playing will not die at the end. Instead, she'll bring an end to the feud between the House of Montague and the House of Capulet."

I see. Now that's something I can understand very well. What a scary Juliet that is.

"And I took the opportunity to request my classmates' assistance for handling the lighting during our live performance, since our band will be performing right after."

I was really thankful for that.

"So all that's left is to wait for you to finish your composition. Can you finish it by this week?"

"Uguuh!"

Senpai grabbed me by the collar just as I was about to slip out of the practice room.

"Oh right, the effect of the performance would be much greater if you could replace the lyrics of <Promenade> or <Great Gate of

Kiev> with grand words. How about using the hymns of the Russian Orthodox Church?"

"Why are you making things difficult for me....."

"Because, although you moan and complain, you always answer my expectations at the end of the day. That's how it has always been, be it the chorus contest or the sports day. That's what I like about you, young man."

Please don't say that to me in such close proximity to me while holding my head in your arms!

"..... Why—"

I wanted to ask Senpai what Mafuyu meant when she said "*You really have no idea why?*" But I swallowed my words upon facing Senpai, who looked as though she could bite me while wearing the smile of a ferocious beast. What's the point in asking her that anyway?

Can I respond to her demands, or will I fail? The answer must be one of the two.

In the end, the four of us couldn't find any time to practice together. It felt kind of sad to head home without making any progress, so I decided to make a trip to the library.

But where on earth are the hymns of the Russian Orthodox Church even located? Are they categorized under religion? Or foreign literature? Come to think of it, it's unlikely that I'd find such books in the school library in the first place. There weren't many people around, so I walked about aimlessly among the bookshelves as my gaze wandered about the endless rows of book spines.

I did want to meet Senpai's expectations of me, but I was short on time. If all I can do is struggle in the same spot while racking my brains on something I deemed impossible, then I might as well apologize to Senpai right now!

I'm just an ordinary high school student that has studied a little bit of music history and music theory. And I only picked up the bass four months ago.

By coincidence, I came across a small silhouette standing in front of one of the foreign literature shelves. I almost yelled out in



surprise. When Mafuyu noticed me, she froze for a brief moment as well, with her hand reaching out for a book on the shelf.

"Why—" Why are you at the library? I was about to ask her that question, but I shut my mouth immediately. Speaking in the library was strictly forbidden.

Mafuyu quickly placed the book back on the shelf and shook her head vigorously, then walked past me in a flash and exited the library. I didn't even have a chance to stop her.

It felt like she had been avoiding me ever since that day. Come to think of it, I said a lot of depressing things to Mafuyu back in the music preparatory room. Not only did I blame my lack of progress on the composition on other things, I wove a whole lot of other excuses as well—

Moreover, I didn't manage to ask Mafuyu the most important question.

Will she not come to school anymore? It was just as Ebichiri had said—Mafuyu had been applying for leave more frequently in the recent days. Perhaps she's busy with the recordings.

It somehow felt like Mafuyu had slowly drifted away from me before I could express what I wanted to say.

I glanced at the shelf Mafuyu was searching through earlier. I had no idea if it was some sort of coincidence or something else, but she was searching through Russian literature as well. The books were indexed under the character "タ (ta)". Then Chekhov, Turgenev..... Fyodor Dostoyevsky.....? Tolstoy? No wait, not all the books on the shelves are novels. There were a few books on Kagurazaka-senpai's favourite revolutionary, Trotsky, as well. Mafuyu was planning to read stuff like this? I don't recall ever seeing her read these kinds of books before. [Editor Note: Bookshelves in Japan are sorted by kana order; for example, "ta" would be followed by "chi" "tsu" "te" "to". Thus, "Chekhov (Chehhofu, che is a compound sound starting with chi)", "Dostoyevsk (Dosuefusukii, do goes with to)" and "Tolstoy (Torusutoi, ru comes after su)".]

I guess I really don't understand Mafuyu a single bit after all. Whenever we spoke to each other, it was always about music.

However, in the near future, we won't be able to chat like that anymore.

Mafuyu had already taken up an unimaginable amount of space in my heart.

Will Mafuyu continue to stay in feketerigó as its guitarist—all I had to do was ask. But I was afraid of her answer. There was no way I could ask her,

Can you..... stay with me, here, by my side?



After that came the weekend. I didn't make my way down to the practice room after school on Friday. Instead, I headed straight home. I did that because I hadn't made any progress at all—the staff papers were as spotless as ever. That was just embarrassing of me. I couldn't bring myself to face Mafuyu, Senpai, or Chiaki.

Even though I hesitated for quite a while, I sent a mail with a rather unconvincing "Sorry, stomach's aching. I'll be heading home first" to Chiaki's phone. I hugged my head and squatted down at the entrance of the house when she replied with "You've always sucked at feigning sickness, you know."

I was quite worried about how I would've responded to a call from any of the three girls, so I hid myself in my blankets, plugged in my earphones and blasted my ears with <London Calling> by The Clash until I fell asleep.

I woke up to the ringing of my handphone and groggily checked the time. Nine. But I had no idea whether it was morning or night. No wait, light's filtering in through the curtains, so it should be morning. I was assaulted by a strange noise that had caused me to nearly miss the ringtone. And why does my head hurt? It took me a while to realize I was still wearing my earphones. I quickly removed the earphones that had been endlessly transmitting the voice of Joe Strummer.

I looked at the number of the incoming call. Not from my band mates, and a number unknown to me. It started with 03..... From Tokyo?

I was greeted by a clear voice the moment I accepted the call.

"—Naomi? Are you Naomi? Great, I finally got through!"

"..... Yuri?"

There was no way I could forget his candy-like voice. Come to think of it, I did give him my number. But why is he calling me?

"Are you free today, Naomi?"

"..... Eh?"

"Today's a rest day, isn't it? Can you head down to Shibuya before three?"

"Eh? Ah, well....."

I answered him in a daze as I rapped on my temple with my fist, attempting to jolt myself awake. Shibuya? Today, and then what?

"We made an agreement with each other, didn't we? I was going to be the one to invite you next time, so I could retaliate."

"Ah, yeah."

It still felt like my eyes were obscured by something hazy. Yuri was looking for me? So he was serious about what he said, and didn't just say it on a whim? What did he mean by retaliate?

My low spirits were more or less related to Yuri, but it wasn't his fault. And it was rare of him to invite me out.

Perhaps it's not a bad idea to meet up with someone, aside from my band mates, that I can talk music with. But it might just end up turning into a situation where he just listens to me as I whine and complain, and I have no desire to let Yuri see me in such a state—

"Urm..... where should I wait for you at three?"

"You are willing to come down? That makes me really happy! There's a 3L Studio located at Spain-zaka, do you know where that is?"

"Ah..... I should be okay with a search on the net." I hadn't been to Shibuya before.

"See you at three, and do not be late."

"What's happening there?" Since the place was a studio, it should

be something related to the band?

"It is a secret. I want to surprise you."

I knew he would say that. That was just the sort of person he was.

"Oh right, I have a question for you. I'm fine with meeting you, but about your attire....."

"Mmm, don't you worry. I will be wearing something cute that you will definitely like."

That wasn't what I meant! But he hung up on me just like that. I kept my phone on and booted up the computer. I searched "3L Studio" and found the information I wanted right away. Since I wasn't very familiar with Tokyo, I printed the map out. Factoring in some extra time, in case I got lost, I estimated I had to leave at around noon.

I should've taken a closer look at the search results. If I had, I would've known why Yuri had wanted to meet me there.



Spain-zaka was a small street filled with stores on both sides. There was an irritatingly large number of cafes, general stores and fashion stores, but the outer appearance of all the stores adhered to popular South European styles. The place was exceptionally crowded, probably because it was a Saturday afternoon. I never would've expected to sweat in October, but the heat caused by the crowd was too much.

It took me a while to locate the pristine building with the words <Studio LLL> written on the wall. Adjacent to the words was the logo of a recording company, which caused me cower a little. Wait, so this is actually a commercial recording studio?

A lady in uniform behind the counter led me into the building when I gingerly told her my name. Studio No. 7. We walked past a lobby with a kitchenette in it, then opened the soundproof door located furthest to the left.

"Mr. Hikawa is here."

With that, the counter lady urged me inside.

An incredibly large mixer—the largest I had ever seen—occupied half the space of the control room, and looked like the cockpit of a giant robot straight out of an anime. Sitting on the chair in front of the mixer was a guy sporting sunglasses and a sparse beard. He was giving off quite a wild aura, so I figured he was probably the music producer or something. He shot me a brief look. Despite his sunglasses, I could tell he wasn't too happy.

Standing next to him was a fat middle-aged man that was almost bursting out of his polo shirt. Probably the audio engineer. He grinned and walked towards me when he noticed my presence.

"You must be Tetsurou's son? Nice to meet you."

"Urm..... How did you know?"

"Hmm, back in the day, he used to watch over me a lot. What exactly he did though, is something I can't really reveal."

As expected of the industry's ruffian. No wait, where's Yuri?

As I scanned the surroundings with my eyes opened wide, the door to the control room opened all of a sudden, and a small person came rushing in.

"Naomi!"

Yuri was about to rush towards me to give me a hug, but the producer quickly stood up and grabbed him by the collar to pull him away.

"Don't be silly, head back into the recording room right now! This may just be a test recording, but there's no time for you to be fooling around! You're not the only person recording here!"

"Uhhh—" Yuri swung his limbs about with tears in his eyes. He's not the only one recording?

I looked through the soundproof glass located in front of the mirror. On the other side of the window was a spacious recording room filled with plenty of microphones; and in the middle of that room was a black piano with its lid propped open—

Her maroon-colored hair swayed lightly. She looked towards me.

"..... Mafuyu?"

It was Mafuyu. It was indeed Mafuyu sitting before the piano in a

pale yellow dress. She crossed sights with me; and lots of different expressions flashed past her face before she returned back to her calm state. Then, all of a sudden, she turned her face away.

"Mafuyu said she wanted you to be here."

I couldn't believe what Yuri said. I looked back and forth at the side profiles of their faces, located on opposite sides of the glass window.

"She wants you to listen to this song we will be recording right now."

Mafuyu..... Does she really want me to listen to her duet with Yuri?

Her navy blue eyes were looking at me through that thick glass again. Her gaze seemed to be inquiring something of me, but was blocked off by Yuri's back when he returned to the recording room.

After nodding in my direction, Mafuyu turned to face the piano. Yuri lifted his violin, and flashed a brief smile before picking up his bow.

With my mind in a mess, I thought, "I see, so this is the retaliation Yuri was talking about?"

Back then, I had invited Yuri out to make him listen to a mashed-up concerto of him and Mafuyu playing together. But this time, it was Yuri's turn to strike.

I had created the music using the imaginary world of the synthesizer—and with the help of others, no less.

Yuri, however, could create the "real form" of that song together with Mafuyu.

"Hey, Hikawa Junior."

The bearded producer spoke to me softly.

"Don't just stand there, take a seat. You're here to observe, right? Please don't create any trouble for us."

I slumped down into the chair prepared by the audio engineer.

"Take one."

Yuri's and Mafuyu's eyes—which were of the same bluish color—turned ice cold the instant that voice reached the recording room. I

had never seen that gaze from them before. Both of them were neither suppressed, nor burned to a crisp, by the light beaming down from the skies above. They were just looking at the endlessly stretching seas before them.

Yuri thrust the tip of his bow towards the skies. The volume of the sound dropped in an instant after a brief passage of the majestic ascent. At the same time, Mafuyu replied with conflicting feelings of gloom and passion, and formed a harmony using the sounds flowing from her piano. The questions and answers flowing between the two of them then embedded themselves firmly in the A minor key. The first movement was a passage that sounded like someone groping around in darkness. Yuri's hands were pulling that song towards the light.

This song is—

Beethoven's Opus 47, **<Violin Sonata No. 9>** in A major—**<Kreutzer Sonata>**.

As my brain became engulfed by the sound that was searing its presence into me, I suddenly recalled an old expository article Tetsurou had written.

*There are countless numbers of duet concertos written for the piano and the violin—the king and queen of the classical music instruments. Before the appearance of Beethoven, all the concertos were written with the piano as the main focus, with the violin serving as a decorative ornamental, an "accompaniment to the piano concerto."*

—Those were Tetsurou's words. I guess this is something all composers know well already, but the timbre of the two instruments are fundamentally not compatible with one another, so there's no way to harmonize the two instruments together when they're by themselves. Even the genius Mozart couldn't bring the queen on equal terms with the king in his violin concertos.

The idea of harmonizing the two instruments was finally abandoned in Beethoven's era. And in **<Kreutzer Sonata>**, the final form of the violin concerto composed by Beethoven, this "battle" between the violin and the piano is given form.

At that moment, I finally understood the meaning behind those words.

A sense of frustration, brought about by the stagnant atmosphere, baited the hammering of the piano. The violin's passage then began to dance as though it were engulfed by the tongues of the flames. The same melody was constantly sent to my ears, though sometimes, it was sliced into pieces, and other times, stomped into dust. There were times where it was above me, other times, below. The gradually increasing heat seeped its way into my ears before it finally tore apart its wounds and burst into a touching movement. It felt like someone, in response to the music, had taken away my sense of hearing inside my consciousness. But despite all that, I couldn't move my gaze away from the scene on the other side of the window—the scene of Yuri and Mafuyu giving their all as they played.





Both of them were standing on the same ground, at a place high above me.

It was a place I couldn't reach with my hands, a place screened off by a wall of mirages.

How long has it been since I last cried listening to music? A searing sensation streaked down my cheeks, but at the same time, the wisecrack personality inside me was thinking calmly like an idiot: the emotions I had felt the morning Misako had left the house were nowhere near close to the emotions I'm experiencing right now.

Why does Mafuyu want me to listen to this?

From now on, the one by her side..... will no longer be the person that has been lending her his shoulders, that has been supporting her with his exhausted body. She had found someone who could fight together with her beneath the same sky. What does she want from me after I'm finished listening to this song? I had no idea.

But there was one thing I was painfully clear about—I will never be able to touch Mafuyu, who's standing on the other side of the glass window, ever again. That made me really sad. My tears were burning my throat.

At the end of the first movement, the separate melodies of the two soared through the storm towards the gap between the clouds. And as they flew upwards, they harassed and gnawed at each other, then, were finally cut off by a crash.

Yuri lowered his bow gingerly, amid the lingering sounds that shook even the soundproof walls. Mafuyu lifted her hands slightly off the keys of the piano as well. I stood up unconsciously. I knew Mafuyu was about to look in my direction, but I didn't have the confidence to accept her gaze.

I pushed the back of the audio engineer aside and made my way to the door. The two people behind me seemed to be saying something. I rammed the door open with my body and stumbled my way towards the lobby.

When I became surrounded by the dry air of the outside world, I finally understood the dampness on my cheeks wasn't an illusion. I burst out of the building and dashed through the crowds of Spainzaka. As I took in huge gulps of air, all I could feel was my shirt, drenched in sweat, sticking to my back. It felt like my body was about to melt away because of the heat.

But I couldn't stop in my tracks.

If I stopped..... If I regulated my heartbeat and steadied my hurried breaths, the <Kreutzer Sonata> Mafuyu and Yuri played would reverberate endlessly in my ears once again. And it wasn't just that, the variations of the second movement, as well as the tarantella of the third movement, would also surface in my mind, despite having not even heard them. And that would've torn me into pieces.



I must have looked like a wreck when I returned home, as Tetsurou had come out to welcome me yelling "Nao, I'm hungry," but had silently walked back into the living room after seeing my face.

I shut myself in my room and dropped onto my bed with a thud. Lying there, I was suddenly overcome with strong feelings of regret. What the hell was I doing? I had dashed out of the building without even saying anything, before I could even ask Mafuyu or Yuri any questions. I had even circled the Yamanote Line a few times on the train. Mafuyu had called me multiple times, but I didn't have the courage to pick up the phone. It never even crossed my mind to switch the phone to silent mode, or to turn the phone off; instead, I just let the phone blare <Blackbird> a few times on the train. The other passengers stared at me in irritation because of that, making me feel even worse.

What an idiot I am.

Thank god it's a rest day tomorrow. Otherwise, I wouldn't know how I would face Mafuyu.

I'll have to explain it clearly to Mafuyu. After talking to her about it and apologizing to her—

Then what?

I opened and closed my handphone a few times and hesitated for a while. But in the end, I couldn't press the button.

I heard knocking on my door. Tetsurou asked,

"..... Nao, want some cup noodles?"

I nodded my head slightly while laying my head on my desk. There was no way he could've seen me doing that, but I heard the door open anyway. A cup of steaming hot instant noodles appeared before my eyes.

"You can talk to me if it's about music," Tetsurou murmured. "Sorry for being a useless father. I can't help you much."

"No, you're much better than me," I thought to myself.

Because you always notice when I'm feeling down.

Tetsurou left without saying anything else. I held the cup noodles silently with both of my hands. It feels so warm! But I was in no mood to eat it.

"Why have things become like this?" I thought.

I recalled the questions Yuri had asked me before.

*"Why do you want to be together with Mafuyu?"*

*"Naomi, what is your relationship with Mafuyu?"*

Just what is the relationship between us? And also, Mafuyu and I

---



I had almost sunk myself completely in a quagmire, but was pulled out of that, and back to reality, by something I had heard quite a few times already: a rapping on my room's window.

It was a Sunday morning, and a silhouette was blocking out the rays of the sun that were filtering in through the curtains. I could hear the dull sound of a fist knocking against the glass window. I snuggled against the blanket and counted the knocks for a while. Who's that? Is that Mafuyu? Nah, can't be her.

I stumbled to the window and opened it along with the curtain. A pair of denim suspenders and a mustard-yellow blouse came into view. Moving my eyes up, I saw a pair of eyes staring back at me with a headstrong gaze.

So it is indeed Chiaki.....

"..... You thought it'd be Mafuyu instead?"

Chiaki questioned me with a very serious expression on her face. I quickly turned my eyes away.

"Nope....."

"Then I'm coming in."

Strangely overwhelmed by her imposing attitude, I took a step back. Chiaki removed her shoes and entered through the window frame. She then shut the window and leaned against it. Her head was lowered, and she didn't speak a single word.

I walked back to my bed and sat down. Why on earth is Chiaki here?

"Urm, are you angry about what happened on Friday? I'm sorry, I was—" I mean, she saw through my lie. However, Chiaki shook her head.

"That's not the reason I'm angry."

That's not it—

So she's indeed angry huh?

"I heard from Mafuyu," Chiaki said.

It felt like ice had fallen into my lungs. Chiaki lifted her head and stared at me as though she were trying to see right into my heart.

"Mafuyu..... She was worried about you. She had no idea why you left without saying anything, and was thinking all sorts of wild things. She initially wanted to go to your house, but ended up coming to mine instead, because she dared not do it."

So Mafuyu—

She had originally planned to come to my place? Yesterday? It should've already been really late at night.

"..... What happened?"

Chiaki was practically interrogating me.

I exhaled a sigh, then took a deep breath as I stared at my hands with my head dropped low. I never thought Mafuyu would come looking for me after I ran away.

"Why did you run away?"

Chiaki's voice sounded like it came from far away.

I have to give her an answer. I can't just run away forever.

"Yuri said....."

My voice was jammed in my parched throat. It hurts.

"Yuri said that was his revenge. He's an exceptional violinist, and he's together with Mafuyu, so—they'll probably continue to create lots of impressive recordings together from here on out. And with that, Mafuyu will no longer have time for the band. But someone like me....."

I had no idea what I was talking about, but Chiaki's expression became gentler as she listened to me—and that made me feel like crying.

"Someone like me, who's not that great at playing music, will just be stuck in the same place forever. Because of that, Mafuyu and I will probably....."

Not be together.

Even though I was just muttering whatever came to mind, I guess that was the ultimate reason behind everything. I may never be together with Mafuyu ever again—I was close to tears just thinking about it.

When did I start liking her so much?

I was by her side since the very beginning, and was involved in her sorrow and happiness precisely because I was so close to her. Because I wanted to do something for her..... Because I wanted to follow her.

Why am I only realizing this now, at such an important time like this?

"..... You're really terrible, Nao."

Chiaki murmured. That sentence seeped its way past the almost-healed scars on my face.

"..... Mmm, I know."

"No, you don't understand."

I lifted my head—Chiaki's expression was like the autumn sky. She

had finally put on a smile, but behind it, was a touch of loneliness.

"Both of you are terrible people, but Mafuyu's worse than you. She passed this to me despite knowing about it."

After saying that, Chiaki pulled something out of her pocket and shoved it into my hands.

It was a piece of paper that had been folded several times. I opened it, and realized it was a staff paper. The neat handwritten notes evoked a nostalgic and sweet—yet bitter—feeling inside me. I had felt it once before, when I had received Senpai's scores from Chiaki—when my heart had been sent flying with a kick.

And now, it's—

"Practice it before tomorrow—that's what Mafuyu told me to tell you. Why must I accept chores like these....."

Chiaki pulled her hair, turning it into an untidy heap, as she said that with a sad smile on her face.

"But I guess it can't be helped..... 'Love'..... is a painful thing, isn't it?"

"Eh..... A-Ah..... Mmm."

Chiaki opened the window and sat on the window frame. Her hair, held together with a hair clip, was swaying with the incoming wind. I looked past her shoulders to glance at the gloomy skies. Chiaki continued murmuring,

"I think it's much easier to 'hate,' because all we have to do is separate ourselves. 'Love' is just painful, because the distance between us can never be smaller than zero. And I have no idea what to do."

I stared at Chiaki's profile in a daze as I held the score in my hand.

"Distance..... smaller than zero?" Is she talking about Mafuyu and me?

"Yes, because both of you haven't told the other the most important thing, despite the fact that you've been by each other's sides since the very beginning. You two have never expressed your feelings to each other. That's why!"

She continued looking up at the autumn sky, her expression full of

sorrow.

"That's why you can't become closer. And yet, it's painful to not know what to do."

So that's what she means by not being able to reduce the distance beyond zero.

Why does Chiaki understand the feelings in my mind so well?

"Oh right....."

When she turned around, the smile on her face had returned, back to the same cheerful smile she always had.

"I only let you off the hook this time because you wouldn't be able to play the bass if I fractured your arms after punishing you using the **Juji Gatame**, got it?"

..... Miss Chiaki, the smile on your face is really scary, you know?

"Well then, see you at school tomorrow. If you wimp out and don't come to band practice tomorrow..... how about I let you have a taste of my figure-four leglock? I mean, you can still play the bass even if your legs are snapped in two."

Chiaki nimbly leapt through the window frame after uttering that dangerous line at me. I watched her climb down the tree without any trouble, then shifted my attention back to the score.

This is something Mafuyu wrote for me. For me?

It was the bass part of a certain song. Looking at the phrasings, it's probably intended for the cello or the double bass. We were really bad at expressing our feelings—not only were words incapable of breaking into our souls, they weren't even close to touching them. But our feelings were forever connected by music.

That was why I had to pick up the bass by my bed.

That's the one place I can return to, regardless of how bad things have become.



"Nao, it feels like you aren't aware of the fact that you're a member of the Third Class of First Year."



"Didn't you hear at the class meeting? Didn't we say we'd be coming early to work on the class decorations?"

I made an effort to reach school slightly earlier on Monday, but was scolded by my classmates who had come to school early in the morning to work on the class decorations.

"S-Sorry....."

"You didn't regularly attend the practices for the sports meet either."

"Listen up Nao. The only one that can withstand the atrocity of our class-rep and the fellow girls of our class is you, because of the training you've received in the Folk Music Research Club. So we'll leave the food preparation on the actual day of the festival to you."

"..... Then what will you guys be doing?"

"We'll be busy with the other important jobs!"

"Like taking pictures of the waitresses, selling the photos, and appreciating the pictures."

"You guys, enough is enough!" Upon seeing the furious Terada, the guys quickly picked up their tools and returned to their workplaces scattered all over the classroom.

"Listen up, Nao!"

Terada prodded my chest hard when she said that.

"You'll be in the kitchen the whole day, since everyone knows you're good at cooking. You can practice in the home economics room the day before the festival. I don't think there will be any time for you to rest."

"No wait, am I not going to be a waiter?" Didn't they make me put on the waiter's outfit back then?

"Your job also includes taking pictures with our guests while wearing the waiter's attire, so you'll have to rush into the classroom when anyone requests a picture."

"What's the point of that....."

"Do you have a complaint?"

"Nope....." I whimpered. I couldn't complain because I hadn't really

participated in any of the class activities.

But I had to thank our busy schedule. Through the corners of my eyes, I saw Mafuyu working on an innovatively designed wooden binder—which would be used for our menus—together with Chiaki and the rest of the girls.

We never had an opportunity to speak with each other, much less exchange looks. But that was for the better, as I had no idea how I should've carried myself while speaking to her. It's impossible for us to carry on like this forever, though, since her seat is right next to mine.

When the bell rang, my classmates quickly began to stuff the half-finished work into the cabinets. The larger items were moved to the space at the back of the classroom.

Mafuyu returned to her seat beside me. I dared not raise my head, and had even hoped that the hustle of the class would continue on forever. Chiaki, who was sitting in front of me, turned her head around to briefly glance at me, then shrugged her shoulders in resignation.

The hustle in our class gradually died down, and the sound of the chairs slowly came to a halt.

"Naomi....."

A tiny voice reached my ears, but I couldn't hear it clearly. I stared at my table and squeezed out an answer.

"..... Mmm."

"Did you practice it?"

I looked at the pocket of my guitar case. In it, was the score Chiaki had passed on to me yesterday.

"..... More or less. But it's still not....."

"Alright, head to the practice room after school."

Said Mafuyu faintly. It felt like my heart had melted, boiled, and was close to flowing out of my ears. She should be angry. Is she okay with talking to me?

Can I stay by Mafuyu's side?

I gulped and nodded my head.

I ran away from the classroom during lunch break. Mafuyu, who sat beside me, had occasionally been looking at me with those eyes—eyes that looked like they contained the night sky. It seemed like she wanted to say many things to me, but I almost became asphyxiated by her gaze.

I walked along the corridors in dejection and thought to myself, "Everything should be okay if I have a heart-to-heart talk with her. I'll apologize, then ask her the question properly, before I..... convey my feelings to her."

Things wouldn't have turned out like this if I could do just that.

So I ran out of the classroom, now what? Mafuyu might appear in the practice room if I hide in there to kill time (though recently, it has been rare for her to lock herself in the room during lunch break).

All Mafuyu told me was to head to the practice room after school; that was the only agreement between us. And so, the pathetic me decided to follow only that, and delayed concluding the matter. If that's the case, then all I have left is that place.

The rooftop.



"I was right after all. The only place you can run to is here. You haven't been here recently, but I had a feeling you would come. Looks like I made the right decision to cast my web here."

Kagurazaka-senpai, who was leaning against the fence and listening to her walkman, took off her earphones and flashed a charming smile at me when she noticed my presence.

"Oh no you don't. I'm not letting you run away."

"W-Whoa!"

I turned around, and just as I was about to run away, Senpai came from behind and hugged me to prevent me from doing so.

"Don't you have something to say to me?"

"Urm, well—Hyaa!" Quit exhaling on the back of my ears!

"I'm not angry that you failed to finish the composition last week."

I froze in the Senpai's arms.

"I just feel frustrated when I see you sink into the abyss of your heart without saying a single word, young man. Geez, you and Mafuyu are way too alike. It's painful to watch."

Mafuyu and I are alike.....?

"Both of you bumped into each other for the same reasons, and yet, you two passed each other because of same reasons as well. As a bystander, I find you two unbelievably cute."

I'm fine with you calling me cute, but I'm in no mood to be listening to this.

"Right, I'm actually not even in the mood to say things like this. The day of our live performance is fast approaching, but we haven't even decided on our songs yet. The two of you are frustrating to watch, and I can't dote on you two forever."

"That's because—"

I was close to slumping to the ground, so I gripped Senpai's arms tightly.

"—Do I really have to be the one to compose the song? Why? Senpai's better....."

"I'm better?"

"You're better at coming up with great songs, isn't that right? You're different from me. I'm not well versed in composition—"

Senpai pressed her finger against my lips to stop me from talking further. I twisted my upper body to turn my head around. Senpai plugged one of her earphones into my ear all of a sudden, then placed the other into hers. She pushed her old walkman into my hands.

"..... What's this?"

"My treasure."

Murmured Senpai, as she placed her hands softly on mine before pressing the play button.

The sound of the waves; the footsteps on the sand; the noise of

the portable mini amplifiers. A blurry but gentle dyad. I reflexively held my breath.

Next, I heard a faint singing voice.

"This is....."

I lifted my head and was almost sucked in by Senpai's eyes. We were so close our skin was almost touching. But the only thing connecting us was the thin, long wire of the earphones.

"You do remember, don't you?"

I nodded my head in surprise. How can I possibly forget? It was the sample tape I had recorded during our training camp—the tape filled with my voice and my immature playing of the bass.

"This is the song you stole from me."

Senpai's fingernails scratched my arms lightly.

"You have no idea how big the shock I suffered back then was, right?"

Senpai's sad murmurs overlapped with my singing voice. I couldn't breathe.

"It's really simple, young man. It's much simpler than what you're thinking inside your head. You have the power to make a tune take shape. And that power of yours is something that I lack—"

Senpai dug her nails deep into my arms.

"That's why I delegated the task to you. It's that simple."

"But, but I—"

"I know what you're going to say. This time around, your opponent isn't just me, but also Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky, Keith Emerson, Greg Lake and Carl Palmer. And that you have no chance of winning. Am I right?"

I hesitated a while, then nodded my head. That is indeed the case, according to how Senpai views it. But if you ask me, the problem is as simple as "I am not confident at composing."

"Mmm, I get it."

Senpai laughed and removed the earphone from my ear. The song that was playing in half my world disappeared, and for a brief

moment, it felt like I had been abandoned beneath a starless sky.

A feeling of uneasiness assaulted me and froze my inner body when Senpai took a step back. Is she giving up already? Has Senpai given up on entrusting me with this task? Why do I feel so depressed? Isn't this what I wanted all along?

"I will never give up."

Senpai flashed a sinister smile, then fished something out of her jacket pocket and stuffed it into my hands.

I looked at the object and was rendered speechless.

"What's..... this?"

"Hmm? Isn't it obvious? A sauce cutlet bun, of course. You know, for victory. Though I'm not praying for your victory."

"Ah, right....."

It was indeed a sauce cutlet bun wrapped up in plastic. But what's with the "praying for victory"?

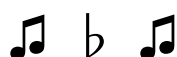
"Because Comrade Ebisawa asked to meet you today after school, right? She's doing the same thing you did before, when you talked about wanting to teach her a lesson because she wouldn't accept what you said."

"Ah....."

"The two of you are really alike. And that's why, young man—"

Senpai put on a gentle expression all of a sudden and placed her palm on my chest, close to my heart.

"I hope she'll teach you a really good lesson."



Our afternoon lessons consisted of two hours of physical education, so class had ended without me bumping into Mafuyu. As I was heading to the changing room, exhausted, I saw that the girls that had already finished changing had begun working on sewing the tablecloths and designing the brochures. I didn't see Mafuyu there though.

"She has already made her way to the practice room," said Chiaki.

"Hurry up, stupid Nao! It's best you get your ass kicked by Mafuyu!"

"..... Mmm, I get it. I'll go and get my ass kicked by her right now."

Chiaki tilted her head in surprise when she heard my reply. She then returned to being angry and turned her head away.

"I must apologize to Chiaki properly one day," I thought to myself.

But for now—

When I reached the courtyard, the old music building looked gloomier than usual somehow. I could faintly hear a guitar playing Beethoven's bagatelle through the soundproof door. Despite the fixes I had made, the soundproofing still wasn't perfect; sounds still leaked out from inside the room.

It's the same as that day.

"..... Mafuyu?"

I yelled. Beethoven's bagatelle stopped for a moment.

There was no response. I tried pulling the door open, but it was locked.

My gaze fell to my feet, as I was at a loss at what to do. It was then that I noticed a small black hole had been dug under one of the hinges of the soundproof door. A cable connector—that had been fitted for the purpose of the previous showdown—was sitting there. So it has been five months since that showdown huh. It still felt unreal.

It felt like the time I had spent with Mafuyu was way longer than that—but I guess that illusion of mine was caused by the lack of communication between us.

The god of music will be angry if I push the blame onto him, right?

But god, please give me, someone who's not good at expressing himself, a chance.

I opened up my guitar case and pulled out the cable. I plugged one of the ends into my bass, and the other, beneath the hinge. It felt like a faint electrical surge had flowed through my body the instant I plugged the cable into the connector.

"..... Are you ready?"

I finally heard Mafuyu's voice behind the soundproof door. I leaned against the door and replied,

"Mmm."

I had zero confidence I would be able to follow her tempo, since I only had one night to prepare for this, but more importantly, I didn't even know what song we were playing. Who's going to be the one to start?

\*Giin\* The sound of feedback, along with Mafuyu's breathing, could be heard behind my head.

The faint sounds flowing from the strings of the guitar caused me to unconsciously hold my breath. As the violin and viola played long overlapping octaves, another violin squeezed itself in during the brief intervals, playing trills.

Of course, those sounds were produced by none other than Mafuyu's guitar. The timbre was so incredibly clear and comforting, it was difficult to imagine that those sounds were being produced by the hands of a girl. I almost missed the timing of my entrance into the piece. The bone-chilling footsteps of the cello approached me one step at a time, amid the icy clear sounds of the treble. It was a passage filled with unease.

It was a string quartet, one whose harmony was vastly different from what I was familiar with. My body was trembling with the inexplicable harmony, which had an Eastern European style to it. I know this tune; I should have heard it before. From the cello to the viola, and then the viola to the first violin. I searched through my mind as I endured the frustrating melody. It's probably music from the Czech, but it's not Smetana or Dvorak. If that's the case—

I finally got it. Janáček.

It was at that very moment that I really felt like I had been hit by a bolt of electricity, causing me to be unable to find my own melody. Mafuyu's solo of the three melodies were scratching the back of my neck. I got it.

It's Janáček's String Quartet No. 1, [\*\*<Kreutzer Sonata>\*\*](#).

Despite having the same name as Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 9, there are no traces of <Kreutzer> in the melody of the piece.



Because what connects the two pieces, separated by a hundred and twenty years, is something completely unrelated to music.

I desperately gripped my bass and tried to find someplace in the music where I could enter. It was only then that I realized that what Mafuyu wanted me to listen to, was not just that piece she had performed live together with Yuri in that studio.

Mafuyu's guitar didn't give a damn about my bass and just continued its way forward as it weaved out the melody. I couldn't catch up to her—there was no way I could reach her side at all. Mafuyu's back was becoming smaller and smaller.

But I can't remain stagnant.

If I wish to stay by Mafuyu's side, the only thing I can do is run.

I fumbled my bass around without much of a clue. The intermittent and sporadic themes of the quartet aggravated my sense of frustration, causing the bass to continually slip out of my weak grasp. Before long, Mafuyu had constructed a tall arpeggio bridge across the raging waves of the repeating melodies. She then abandoned me just like that. The melody kept rising, and became transparent before finally fading into a cloud of mist, disappearing completely.

I heaved a huge breath, then removed my sweaty palms from the bass and pressed the back of my head against the door. I accomplished nothing. I just stared at the walls of the school building—because tears would've flowed out from my eyes if I had closed them.

For some reason, I knew Mafuyu's body was on the other side of the door.

Despite her being so close to me, I had come up with all sorts of nonsensical thoughts, and had even run away before Mafuyu could even speak. How should I apologize to her? What should I say—

The door behind me opened all of a sudden, causing me to dive into the soil. I hit my head against the ground.

"Geez, you can't keep up at all....."

I directed my gaze towards the source of the sound. Mafuyu, who was standing behind the door, crossed sights with me while my

forehead was still stuck on the ground. That made her swallow her words. She ran to my side and knelt down as she peeked at my face with teary eyes.

"..... S-Sorry, are you alright?"

"Eh? Ah, I-I'm fine." I stiffly moved backwards a little, with my butt and hands still on the ground. I then patted the soil off my pants and said, "I'm fine, really. Mmm."

I was at a loss for words again, so I shifted my gaze away from Mafuyu's face. I found myself useless and pathetic.

Mafuyu, however, remained at my side with her lips tightly shut—at a distance at which we would touch each other if I got up even just a little.

Before long, the silence forced the words out of my throat and through my mouth,

"..... Sorry. You took the effort to get me here, and yet, I screwed up. And this <Kreutzer>. You prepared it specifically for me, but I didn't realize it at all..... I'm really sorry."

I finally said it. I took three deep breaths to stabilize my emotions, then slowly moved my eyes onto Mafuyu. Her navy blue eyes reflected that embarrassing face of mine clearly.

Mafuyu lowered her gaze and shook her head.

"You do not have to apologize to me for that."

Her cold voice froze my throat.

"You should apologize to Yuri instead. He was really concerned about that. As for me—"

Mafuyu, whose head had been lowered all this while, pressed her forehead against my chest. A burning sensation arose where her forehead was, and my heart started pumping wildly, like a beast's. I couldn't move my body.

"I long knew you were stupid, dense and slow, and someone who does not take my feelings into consideration at all."

I really felt like crying when she reminded me of my shortcomings.

"However, it is fine as long as you realized this piece is

<Kreutzer>."

Mafuyu let her depressed voice fall onto my chest, one word at a time.

I hadn't even realized something as simple as that. I had never considered that she might've been searching for books written by Tolstoy when I bumped into her at the library.

19th century Russian writer Lev Tolstoy had written a novel inspired by Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 9. The novel, whose name was endowed with the same title as Beethoven's sonata, had found its way back into the hands of a musician after a whole century. Janáček used that novel as inspiration for a series of his early works, and named them after the title of the book. Most of his works were lost over the years, so the String Quartet No. 1 was the only piece left to inherit that ill-fated name.

<Kreutzer Sonata>.

A hundred and twenty years apart, they were linked only by their identical names. Music—novel—music.

Such miracles appeared frequently around the world. That was how music linked the fates of people from different eras and different countries together. I doubt Janáček was afraid of falling under Beethoven's shadow when he was composing his own <Kreutzer>. He just borrowed a few phrases while showing Beethoven his greatest respect. That was how music was interlinked. Almost all the music we had in our hands were remnants found at the ends of the flow of music.

And so—

"There is no need for you to be afraid of Mussorgsky."

Mafuyu lifted her head. The tips of our noses were almost touching.

"All you need to do is come up with an ordinary rock piece. Even if the work is copied from others, the music still belongs to you. I..... Chiaki, Kyouko and I—we all want to play the piece composed by you."

"..... Mmm."

My music.

No matter how much of it is copied from others, regardless of how humble I am, even if I were to turn my gaze and run away—

I cannot disappear from this place.

"You....."

Mafuyu pushed my chest hard with both her hands, making me to stumble backwards. I stabilized myself by planting my arms on the ground behind me.

"You played so badly! Practice properly and quickly finish your composition, alright? You could not even catch up to me at all."

"M-Mmm....."

I sank into depression when she lectured me right in front of my face.

"Did you think about it properly? Or are you still stuck?"

"I did think about it a little, but....." I was mumbling vaguely. I retracted my chin when Mafuyu's face closed in on me. "When I was fiddling with the synthesizer in my house while trying to compose, I always ended up coming up with some sort of arrangement using the keyboard. But that arrangement won't work for the live performance, so there's no—"

"But you have me."

..... Eh?

Mafuyu pressed her right hand into my chest. Different from the hands of Kagurazaka-senpai, not only were Mafuyu's hands soft, their touch felt unreal as well.

'Because I can move my right hand again.'

For a moment, I couldn't understand what she was trying to say. I lowered my head to look at her delicate right hand, then stared at Mafuyu's face and muttered with a sense of disbelief,

"What do you mean..... You're willing to play? No, but..... this is a live performance, no?"

"I cannot use that as an excuse any longer. I am about to return..... to that place."

I could feel something getting caught in my throat. An icy flame was burning in Mafuyu's navy blue eyes.

Mafuyu's about to return to the stage once more—that was the first time I had actually heard it straight from her mouth. After I propped my body up, I could still feel the lingering sensation of her maroon hair brushing against my face.

"B-Back then....."

Mafuyu hugged her chest and said, with a painful expression,

"You helped me many times of your own accord. All I am doing this time is doing the same as you did, so why are you still complaining?"

"S-Sorry." I'm not complaining. I'm just finding it hard to believe right away.

"Finish your composition as quickly as you can, and bring that synthesizer to school as well, you hear me?"

I nodded my head vigorously several times.

Mafuyu offered me the right hand she had once lost.

I accepted her hand with a firm grip, and could feel the strength flowing through my arms when I stood up.

I may not be able to stand up on my own, but Mafuyu is here.

The question I had tried asking several times, but had failed to ask in all of my attempts, was swimming in my mouth once again—will Mafuyu stay by my side? Or will she fly to that world and never return? Regardless of the answer, it didn't really matter to me anymore.

I wish to stay by Mafuyu's side. Even if I can't catch up to her—

I can continue running forward.

# Chapter 5 - The Song of Blackbird

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Three weeks passed by in a flash.

Preparations for the school festival were in their final stages, and a tense atmosphere permeated the school, like muscle pains permeating the body after an intensive exercise. It even felt like the temperature had risen a degree or two after school.

"Are we really going to perform in this attire?"

I asked Senpai yet again as I stood at the edge of the stage of the sports complex. The space behind me was occupied by the drums, the amplifiers and the footlights; and in front of me, in the middle of the stage, was Senpai, standing before the microphone.

"Of course. The four of us will be burning on stage!"

Senpai glanced at Mafuyu, who stood at the left of the stage, and then at Chiaki, who stood behind the drums, and her expression became slightly dazed. They were both wearing a black dress with lots of frills; and since Mafuyu had European blood in her lineage, the dress suited her perfectly.

As for me, I was wearing a black vest with a half apron—the typical outfit for a waiter.

And lastly, there was Kagurazaka-senpai. Her attire was fashioned in the style of 14th-century Italy—it was a glorious white multi-pleated dress accompanied with a bright red shawl. Simply put, it was her Juliet costume. We were wearing those outfits because Senpai had said we should go on stage in the outfits we would be wearing for our class events.

"We'd waste no time changing, and we can promote the band's live performance during our class events. What a great plan."

"Well..... I guess you're right."

"Actually, I just want to see those two in their outfits, since they're both so ravishing!"

"I have no interest in your true intentions!"

So that's why Senpai wanted us to wear our performance attire despite this being just a rehearsal? The actual performance was still a week away.

Black curtains were draped over all the windows of the sports complex, making the stage appear especially bright under the spotlights. After Chiaki finished tuning the snare drums, she began drumming various fill-ins to warm up.

"Whoa, drumming in this fluffy dress is quite hard," said Chiaki with a frown.

Senpai walked up to the drums and sank into thought.

"Can't we come up with something to display those cute curves on Chiaki's legs in full view of the audience.....?"

How would that even be possible? And now isn't the time to be fretting about things like that, yeah?

"They'll be visible if we switch to transparent drums. How about that?"

"Good idea. I'll check the warehouse of Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store. The only problem is, some of the time, the contents under your skirt will be fully visible to the audience at certain angles, since you're a drummer—"

I decided to ignore the two girls that were seriously discussing silly things like that, and started walking towards the wiring setup for the effects unit. Suddenly, Mafuyu, who was on the other side of the stage, spoke.

"Naomi, can this thing only store up to sixteen sets for performing? Also, I have no idea how to synchronize the memory between these."

She pointed to the two synthesizers that were stacked on top of each other when she said that.



"Ah, hold on. I'll be right over."

An odd sense of lament struck my heart when I saw Mafuyu standing before the keyboard.



Mafuyu has returned to this place once more, to play the piano under the lights again. That was something I had never thought would happen before the end of summer.

"..... Yes?" Mafuyu noticed me staring at her face in a daze. I quickly shifted my gaze to the control board.

"This unit's an older model, so its storage capacity isn't as large. We'll set three main tones for the one on top."

"Is there no way we can synchronize this with the one below?"

After Mafuyu had been introduced to the synthesizers, I had found that I was actually in a position to teach Mafuyu a lot of things. This situation might only be temporary, but I pray this luck will continue on forever. There was really nothing much I could do for Mafuyu.

"It's about time you guys begin your rehearsal! The guys after you are rushing us already."

A member of the Broadcasting Club yelled at us from the temporary PA console erected beneath the stage. I flashed Mafuyu a thumbs-up as Senpai heaved her guitar onto her back and made her way towards the microphone. After that, I ran back to my bass on the left side of the stage.

I turned my head around and saw Mafuyu's guitar slung over her back, supported only by a strap on her shoulder. I had thought that that was quite a crazy idea, but I did want the audience to see Mafuyu as a guitarist on stage as well. She would have to be quick when changing instruments—that must be really tough on her.

But I'm sure it'll be our best performance yet.

The footlights dimmed, signaling a change in scenery. The only lights that remained were the blue lights moving around behind us on the backdrop of the stage.

Then, the sound of endless bubbles floating up from the depths of the water emerged. The metallic timbre of the celesta could be heard vaguely among the waves; and all of a sudden, it felt like I was in the Disney movie <Fantasia>. Exactly what I expected of the synthesizer nurtured by Tomo—it could bring all sorts of different scenes to life, whether it was a snowy morning, or the turbulent sea during a violent storm.

The bright melody of the piano then pierced through the darkness.  
It was the **main theme** of <Promenade>.

The heavily twisted roars of Senpai's Les Paul climbed upwards nonstop as her guitar sunk its teeth deep into Mafuyu's organ. The fugue had only begun its sprint, but had already strayed far away from the music Mussorgsky had envisioned. As it approached the highest register, it began to spread its wings.

My rendition of <Pictures at an Exhibition> couldn't even be considered music if it weren't for Mafuyu's fingers—my spine trembled when I realized that fact. To catch up to Senpai's guitar, Chiaki's fill-ins descended deep into the fugue, with the cymbals exploding countless numbers of times. I paced myself to Chiaki's tempo and suppressed the elation inside me as I carved each and every heartbeat into my mind.



When school was over, the four of us went to McDonald's to hold a meeting—something we hadn't done in a long time. The school festival was only a week away, so it felt like we shouldn't have been wasting any of the remaining time we had left. And because we felt that way, there was no way we could've just gone home right after school.

"Let's sell our feketerigó T-shirts and a CD of our live performance at the entrance of the sports complex!"

And here we have Chiaki with her entrepreneurial mind in full display. She did mention something about selling the T-shirts once before. Was she really serious about that?

"We should make use of this opportunity and sell the <Ebisawa Mafuyu & LOLLYPOPS> T-shirt as a rare item."

"N-No way!"

Mafuyu bumped into her tray when she stood up in protest.

"I'm considering recording our live performance to put on DVD. I mean, we're going to be wearing those beautiful outfits."

Senpai was dreaming as well. No wait, she might actually be

serious about that. As a side note, if we wanted to sell anything during the school festival, we had to first obtain permission from the student council, so the actualization of Chiaki's idea was highly unlikely.

"Oh right, Comrade Ebisawa."

Said Senpai suddenly, with a serious expression on her face. Mafuyu tilted her head in response.

"Are your fingers really okay? You paused in the middle of our rehearsal, and that wasn't a mistake."

Mafuyu's expression froze. So Senpai noticed it as well?

It had happened in the middle of our rehearsal. Having heard that we were rehearsing on stage in our actual attire, various sports clubs had come flocking to the sport complex to watch us in action (and in a certain sense, the Folks Music Research Club was incredibly well known at school). We were performing the fourteenth song, *<Con mortuis in lingua mortua>*, when a beam of light suddenly burst into the sports complex filled with darkness and the whisperings of the spirits. After, a group of noisy people came walking into the hall.

We didn't stop our performance though. Chiaki and I continued to play at the pace we had practiced a countless number of times—we didn't slow down.

But I knew Mafuyu's fingers had gone stiff. The variation of *<Promenade>*, which conveyed the words of the dead, had come to a halt in midair. Mafuyu recovered only when we reached the song *<Baba-Yagá>*.

"..... I am okay."

Mafuyu bit her faintly trembling lip.

"I'm confident the sports complex will be packed with people, so are you really okay?"

Mafuyu didn't open her mouth. Instead, she just nodded her head several times. But that just made me even more concerned, because she had already injured her right wing once amid the glamour of the stage.

"..... I cannot run away any longer."

Mafuyu surprised us with her resolute voice. Even Chiaki dared not look at Mafuyu straight in the eyes; but she still stared at Mafuyu with a worried expression on her face.

"I have wanted to say this for a while now."

Mafuyu's hands were wrapped around the paper cup holding her iced red tea. Her eyes were fixated on the straw.

"I will be embracing my role as a pianist once more, and am currently preparing for the recordings. And if the situation allows, I will perform in a concert as well."

"Then—Comrade Ebisawa will be returning back to that glamorous but icy world?"

Asked Senpai, as she clasped Mafuyu's right hand tightly. Somehow, Senpai's question was phrased the exact same way mine was in my mind. Oh right, I remember Tetsurou once wrote this in a certain critique of his: *"a world shimmering in icy rays."*

Mafuyu nodded.

"Then what about the band?"

Asked Chiaki gingerly. Mafuyu's shoulders flinched—my arms went stiff as well. That was the question I couldn't bring myself to ask, and had long decided not to think about anymore. But Chiaki voiced that question so easily.

"..... I hope to continue playing in the band."

Said Mafuyu, while staring at her own hands.

"I hope." Not "I will."

I should've been happy hearing that answer from her, but the insecure me decided to dig out the seeds of uneasiness that could be found in each and every crevasse of my heart. I mumbled my question without looking at Mafuyu's face.

"But won't you be busy? I mean, with activities like recordings and performances and so on."

Even though I was staring at my knees, I knew the girls were all looking in my direction.

"I do not know. But I will try my best....."

It felt like Mafuyu's voice was slowly fading away.

"Even if you say that now, what will you do when you're on tour, or when you're busy with some other activity?"

"I will—"

"Calm down, young man."

It was only when Kagurazaka-senpai pressed hard on my shoulders that I realized I had actually stood up. Mafuyu was cowering as she looked up at me.

"Comrade Ebisawa has already told us she 'hopes to continue.'"

Senpai pressed her finger hard into my chest.

"There's nothing more assuring than that. And there shouldn't be a problem as long as she wishes for that. Regardless of what happens, we are happy to offer you our strength at any time, to help you realize your dreams."

It was as if Senpai's smile had engulfed my fears as well.

"Just like you had done before."

I swallowed the words I was about to say and sat down on my seat.

We can offer our strength at any time. Is that really true?

If Mafuyu's delicate fingers became immobile again, due to some unfortunate reason..... I wouldn't be able to help her with anything, even if I were by her side.

It was depressing to say, but the person who would be able to help her then wouldn't be me.



Yuri gave me a call that night. I had just finished my bath, and was sitting at the computer sorting through some data for the synthesizer. But not long after I started, I received a phone call.

"Naomi? Sorry, I was really busy. Someone from a certain magazine had found out where I was living, so I was running all over the place. Ah, right. I have decided to carry a handphone with me,

since I think I will be staying in Japan for a while. Do remember my number, okay? Japan's handphones are incredible! They are so small and light!"

I had no idea what I to say when I heard Yuri's voice filled with happiness. We hadn't contacted each other since we had last met at the studio in Shibuya—because I had no way of reaching him. I had actually wondered if I should get Mafuyu to pass a message to him, but it somehow felt a little despicable of me to do that.

"U-Urm....."

I let out a cough. Calm down.

"..... I'm really sorry about last time."

"Eh? A-Ah, mmm, it's okay, I did not take it to heart. But Mafuyu looked really depressed, so you have to apologize to her, okay? Did you make up with her already?"

He's saying the same thing Mafuyu said.....

"I guess. Back then, urm....."

It was hard for me to explain to Yuri. Simply put, I was jealous of him. Thankfully we were just talking over the phone, because I would've run away if we had arranged to meet in person.

"Are you angry at me, Naomi?"

"No, that's not it. No way. Everything's my fault, I got everything wrong. I'm really sorry....."

"Did my performance with Mafuyu make you unhappy?"

"No, no way. How can that be—" I swallowed my words halfway. Actually, in a certain sense, that was exactly what it was. I ran away precisely because their <Kreutzer> had pierced my heart.

"..... Naomi?"

Yuri's voice was filled with a sense of unease.

Perhaps I should just tell him the truth. I'm tired of constantly running away from things.

"Urm, well....."

I shut my eyes and clenched my fists, which were resting on my knees. Then, I relaxed myself, and focused all my attention on my

body.

"Actually..... I'm really envious of you."

"..... Me?"

"Mmm..... Because you're the only one that can compete with Mafuyu's piano."

"Hold on, but Mafuyu told me you would be performing on stage during the school festival, no? And Mafuyu will be playing the synthesizer as well, right?"

"Eh..... yeah."

Oh right, Mafuyu said she was willing to play.

"Then why are you envious of me? Hey, I think I should be the one who is angry right now. I have always, always been envious of you, you know?"

"Eh? Ah, well....."

Why? Why must I be chased about by your words?

"..... But the reason Mafuyu's willing to pick up the piano again is because she wants to play together with you..... and the reason she can move her fingers again is because you have returned."

"..... Me?"

Yuri sank into a temporary silence after that. Urm..... what's wrong?

"..... Hey, Naomi, I want you to answer me honestly."

"M-Mmm."

"Do you love Mafuyu?"

My hand slipped by accident, and the phone dropped to the floor.

"What was that loud sound just now? My ears hurt!" said Yuri, close to tears, when I picked up my phone.

"S-Sorry. Urm, you were saying....."

"I asked you if you are in love with Mafuyu."

I dropped onto my bed and buried my face in my pillow, and fretted over that question for a while. I kicked my legs about under the covers, then collapsed flat onto the bed in exhaustion. The whole

time, the phone had never once left my ears; I had even heard Yuri shout my name out a few times.

I can't run away anymore. I have to give him an answer. I gripped my phone hard.

"..... It's just as you've said."

"I see."

I could somehow see the shoulders of the angel-like boy trembling as he tried his hardest to hold back his laughter.

"I get it then. Naomi has said a lot of mean things to me today, but it cannot be helped if you are in love with Mafuyu. I will forgive you."

"What are you talking about....." Crap, my hand's getting sore holding the phone up.

"But I cannot hand Mafuyu over to you. No way. I will not allow it."

"It's not like she belongs to you."

Ah, no, wait. I hesitated for fifteen seconds, then asked him the all-important question.

"I have a question for you. Are you and Mafuyu, urm..... in that sort of relationship?"

"Hmm? Well, we have both seen the other's sleeping face, and we do swap clothes as well. Our relationship is probably something like that."

What sort of relationship is that..... But come to think of it, haven't I seen Mafuyu's sleeping face before as well? But I spoke no further, as the conversation seemed to be getting more and more complicated.

"Though we used to be together all the time, it is nothing like what Naomi is worried about."

I see. I heaved a soft sigh of relief, but tried my hardest to not let Yuri notice it.

"But Mafuyu does not belong to Naomi either, isn't that so?"

"Urm, you're not wrong. No wait, the way you put it....."

"You do love Mafuyu, right?"



Really? Is that so? I guess it is.

"Have you told Mafuyu yet?"

"How can I possibly say that!?"

"Why not?"

"And you're asking me why not....."

I was thinking, "Because I don't know what'll happen if I tell Mafuyu that."

"Is it that hard? Are you planning to not tell her forever?"

"Don't make it sound so simple, I'm—"

"Listen to me, Naomi....."

"Hmm?"

"I love you."

I accidentally dropped my phone again.

"Be careful! It's really scary when you do that! It feels like my phone will break as well!"

Yuri sounded furious when I picked up my phone again.

"S-Sorry. No, that's not it. Urm, what did you just say?"

"See? It is easy to say it, isn't it?"

I opened my mouth to say something, but froze up instead. After a short while, I finally heaved a sigh, though it felt like I was about to puke my innards out as well.

"Can you quit teasing me? I'm at my limit already."

"It is not my intention to tease you....."

Yuri let out a sigh as well. He actually seemed surprised by my words.

"Just to tell you, I have said that to Mafuyu many times already."

"Whoa....." I can't take it anymore. My head was about to burst.

"Do you want to know just how mean Mafuyu's replies were?"

"Urm, Yuri, I'm sorry. I give up. Please spare me that."

Yuri snickered. That bastard. Someday, I'll pay you back for all this

humiliation.

"Then I will be returning back to the topic!"

"O-Oh, mmm....." Speaking of which, why did he call me in the first place?

"Mafuyu invited me to the school festival. And I do want to attend, but I will be busy rehearsing with an orchestra I have not worked alongside before, so I will not be able to make it. Please tell her that I am sorry."

"Why don't you tell her yourself—"

"Don't be so angry! Because I cannot make it, I have a favor to ask of you. Can you record the performance and pass it on to me? Please?"

"..... Alright."

I hung up. Exhausted, I collapsed onto my bed again. It felt like I had suffered a pretty huge blow, so there was no way I was going to get up any time soon.



"Why are we having sashimi-don for dinner in November? I want something hot."

Tetsurou complained relentlessly at the dining table during dinner.

"I don't have the strength to cook."

I drenched the tuna in a thick layer of soy sauce. How could I possibly cook after that energy-draining phone call?

"Oh well, whatever..... But isn't this miso soup leftover from morning—"

You don't have to eat if you have any complaints.

Despite all that he said, Tetsurou still ate twice as fast as I did. While pouring himself a cup of after-dinner whiskey, he suddenly remembered something and asked,

"Oh right, about Mafuyu from the Ebisawa family—"

"..... Hmm?"

"I heard she'll be playing the piano on stage during the school festival?"

"How did you know that?" I don't remember telling you that. Or did Ebichiri tell you? No way, Mafuyu would never tell her father something like this.

"Nah, I heard it from a fellow industry ruffian. The news is already spreading—you know, since Ebichiri Mafuyu is famous and all."

"you're right, but why are you asking about that now?"

When Mafuyu and her father had returned to Japan from America, they had stirred up quite a huge commotion in the media. But after about a month, the media stopped reporting on the topic, so Mafuyu and I were completely unconcerned about the possibility of the news spreading.

No wait, Ebichiri..... Was he still concerned about this?

"Because, based on what had happened back in June, it seemed like Mafuyu's right hand was already a goner, right? No one knew the details of the situation, and Mafuyu wasn't saying anything either—so everyone had just assumed that Mafuyu had retired already. And that lacks news value. But Julien Flaubert has come to Japan, hasn't he? That has attracted everyone's attention, since the entire industry is aware of the news of him and Mafuyu playing together in Mafuyu's comeback album. So, as a result of all this, a lot of people are interested in knowing whether or not Mafuyu will be playing the piano during your live performance."

"Ah..... I see."

I understood the musical world very well—the closed society of Japan's classical music circles was shockingly small. And Yuri had said the media had information on his whereabouts as well.

This will be quite troublesome for Mafuyu. For some reason, I began to worry about the live performance for the school festival. I hope nothing bad will happen.

"From what I know, there are quite a few companies that would be happy to sink their teeth into any news related to Ebisawa Mafuyu."

"Hold on. Tetsurou, are you really planning to use Mafuyu as a means to earn cash? Don't do that!"

"Oi oi, what's wrong? You think you're a knight or something? Daddy will be heartbroken if you're that interested in girls."

"I'm being very serious here!"

"You know, I've written countless crass and horrible articles to earn money to support you growing up."

"Bring those words with you to your grave! Listen up, Mafuyu's dealing with one of the toughest periods of her life right now, so don't use her for your article!"

Tetsurou made a silly face in response. Damn that bastard, is he planning to visit the school festival?

"Actually, I'm much more interested in the goth lolita café your class is doing."

"How the hell do you know about that!?"

"Heheh, don't underestimate the industry's ruffians."

"What sort of industry are you in!?"

"Just kidding, Chiaki told me. She's really a good girl—she even knew that the legs of high school girls in stockings are what I love the most."

"Don't you dare come! You're banned from coming! I'll call the police if you do!"

"Nao, it's not good for you to keep all the girls to yourself, even if you're in charge of the café. It's not like you'll lose anything if we share."

"I'll have to be in the kitchen..... No wait, stop leading me astray!"

Tetsurou ignored the furious me and ran to grab his digital camera. He then began wiping the camera lens eagerly in anticipation. God damn it, I'll throw you out of the school if I see you that day.



The emcees in charge of the school's broadcast rambled on and on as they helped guests navigate through the festival—I guess even real disco DJs would feel shell-shocked listening to all those announcements. The three performance venues were the sports

complex, the music hall and the audiovisual room; and the performances consisted of dramas, homemade movies, mimes, orchestras, manzai and rakugo. [Note: Manzai is a type of stand-up comedy where two people exchange jokes, mostly involving puns, at high speed. Rakugo is sort of a one-man show, where one person acts out a long comical story.]

The school's corridors were filled with visitors, whose numbers dwarfed the students in uniform by about a factor of three. The ramen store waiter and the mobile advertiser, who had a billboard hanging from his body, were yelling with loud voices; a lost child was crying; and the festival community members, who had logos on their arm sleeves, were running about endlessly with pale faces as they communicated via walkie-talkies.

The school had turned into a battlefield the day of the school festival.

Given how heated the atmosphere was during the chorus contest, it was no surprise the school festival was turning out the way it was. Despite that, though, we hadn't expected our food and drinks to sell out by morning.

"Manager, I bought the bread and ham, but forgot to ask for the receipt."

The student running into the home economics room slammed two full supermarket bags on the table.

"Don't address me as Manager. And cut the ham into halves," I replied hastily, as I quickly diced the onions for the hotdogs.

"The red tea's almost done as well. You should've checked with us before you got the items!" "Can we dilute it with water?" "Just add more ice to it!" "Can't do, the tea's hot." "No problem, they'll never notice."

They definitely will! Don't do that. We're not some unscrupulous shop that rips people off.

"Manager, there's a customer that wants to take a photo with a waiter."

"Again? But I'm really busy right now!"

"Doesn't matter, taking pictures is also part of your job. Now go!"

After being kicked in the butt, I dropped the knives and dashed out of the home economics room. I didn't know whose idea it was, but aside from serving food and drinks, our class also offered customers the opportunity to take a photo with the waiters and waitresses (but they'd have to pay, of course). Thanks to that, our shop had become one of the most popular destinations of the school festival. Of course, the majority of the customers were there for the waitresses in goth lolita costumes; but occasionally, a female customer would request a photo with the waiters, and I would be called upon to take part in that photo, despite the fact that I was already being run ragged by all the work in the kitchen. I've already lost count of the number of times I've run to and from the classroom and the home economics room. Do they want me to die or something?

The entrance of our classroom was decorated with styrofoam that had been made to look like a bricked gate. To enhance the effect, the styrofoam was covered with a layer of ivy—looks like everyone has put in a great deal of effort into this. My head hurt even more when I saw the long queue waiting outside the café. Today's only the first day of the school festival..... Won't it be even more chaotic tomorrow since it'll be a Sunday?

"Welcome..... Oh, it's Nao."

I almost bumped into Terada, who was dressed in a fluffy waitress dress, when I squeezed myself into the heated classroom.

"Come over here, the customer's waiting for you. Let's take a picture."

After five minutes, I was finally spared from the flashes of the camera. However, just as I was about to head back to the home economics room, someone grabbed me by the arm.

"Nao, listen. There was a really weird customer earlier today."

It was Chiaki. She was wearing a headdress instead of her usual hair clips, so I almost didn't recognize her.

"A weird customer?"

"Mmm." Chiaki shot a glance into the classroom. Mafuyu was standing to the left of the tables, taking orders from the customers. She was the only one that looked like she wasn't from Japan. But it

wasn't just the color of her hair and skin, or how her body was perfectly shaped for wearing a dress—even the surroundings around her looked especially different.

"A middle-aged guy had come looking for information about Mafuyu. We're lucky she wasn't serving customers at the time."

"I was questioned as well."

Terada jumped in on our conversation all of a sudden.

"I was asked about what she usually wears, whether she attends the music lessons, things like that. It was incredibly irritating. Also, it seems like the person that approached me was different from the person that spoke to Chiaki. I was approached by two middle-aged men and a young man that looked like a university student. It's really disgusting having so many perverts around."

So there are multiple people asking for information about Mafuyu? Not just one?

"What should we do? Should we make Mafuyu stay away from the classroom?"

"M-Mmm....."

But Mafuyu's our star waitress, and there's actually a whole bunch of people who want to take photographs with her.....

"Since they brought their cameras along with them, we barred them from entering our café."

Whispered Terada, after briefly scanning the café. I see, as expected of our competent class rep.

"They gave off a really suspicious feeling. One of them was wearing a baggy coat; and another one, who looked quite young, was wearing a jersey and sandals."

I froze. A jersey? With sandals?

I looked at Chiaki. Seems like she has noticed as well.

"Was the guy in the jersey also carrying a camera? Urm, unshaven, wore a pair of massage sandals and looked like an unemployed man?"

Terada's eyes opened wide when she heard my question.

"That's right..... You know that guy?"

"How can that possibly be? I don't know anyone that fits that description; and there's certainly no one like that in my family either."

I said something strange without thinking. Chiaki sighed and shook her head in resignation. So Tetsurou actually came!? And was asking questions about Mafuyu? I told him time and time again, but that bastard's still planning on writing that damn article? I'll definitely sever our father-son relationship if he does something like that.

"Call me again if anything happens."

I left the classroom after exchanging a nod with Chiaki. I somehow have a bad feeling about this.



A thunderous cheer erupted inside the sports complex when I was walking towards it past the courtyard. I had almost mistaken it for an earthquake.

It was already three in the afternoon, so the First Class of Second Year's <Romeo and Juliet> performance had just come to an end. The cheers of the audience rang crystal clear in my ears when I entered the sports complex through the back door.

We had turned one of the storerooms into our personal green room. Lots of large and expensive items, such as the amplifiers and the drum set, were stored inside, and things like foldable ladders, extension wires, old bicycles, cupboards, and even a fridge, were piled up in a heap next to the wall. Inside the room were also what looked like props from the Drama Club—either that, or just typical large-sized junk.

I was about to dismantle the drum set, to make it easier to move, when an emotional Kagurazaka-senpai walked into the room with her face flushed red. Her long skirt made it difficult for her to walk.

"Sorry I'm late! The curtain call took quite a bit of time."

"How many people are in the audience?"

"Enough to flood the sports complex with their tears alone. Let's quickly begin our performance..... Where's Comrade Ebisawa and



Comrade Aihara?"

"They couldn't leave because there were too many photo requests. But they should be here soon."

"I too, want to queue up to take a closer look at them in their waitress outfits."

You can look all you want when we're on stage!

But the two girls still hadn't shown up even after the First Class of Second Year had finished cleaning up. Moreover, I had already finished moving the amplifiers and the drum set on stage. We were allotted thirty minutes for cleanup and preparation..... But if they don't make their way here soon, it'll be time to start our performance.

"I'll go to our classroom to see what's happening."

I dashed out the back door after yelling that at Senpai, who was busy setting up the PA system and facing the other way.

After walking past a flight of stairs, I entered the car park, and heard Chiaki's snide voice.

"Stop following us already! Please move away, we're short on time! Didn't Mafuyu say she doesn't want to already?"

They were in the courtyard. I quickened my pace and turned past the corner of the building.

There, I saw the backs of four men in trench coats and half coats, and could also faintly see two black dresses. It was Chiaki—and hiding behind her, was maroon hair.

Chiaki was protecting Mafuyu from those men with all her might, despite the fact that they were cornered at the trees next to the fence. Who are those people? Every one of them had a camera in his hands. Are they the ones that visited our café earlier to get their hands on information about Mafuyu?

"As I said, all I want to do is to ask Mafuyu some questions."

One of the men moved his face close to Chiaki and said with a disgusting voice,

"Eh, are your fingers healed already? What made you want to play the piano on stage today?"

"We heard you'll be releasing a CD with Yuri. When's that coming out? Do the two of you meet up frequently?"

"Please, everyone's looking forward to Mafuyu's comeback."

I ran towards them right away. They're from the media! It was just as Tetsurou had said.

"You haven't played the piano on stage since your concert in London two years ago."

"You suddenly decided not to continue on with the concert anymore, and there was no official apology from you after that. How do you explain that?"

"—Mafuyu!"

I yelled from behind the reporters, who turned their heads around in surprise. Chiaki's expression softened as she relaxed a little, and Mafuyu, cowering behind Chiaki, lifted her head up. I pried apart the guys surrounding them and grabbed Mafuyu and Chiaki's arms.

"Let's go. Senpai's waiting."

"Oi, wait a second."

A reporter placed his hand rudely on my shoulder. I shoved it away and pulled the two girls along as I walked briskly towards the sports complex.

"Hey, come on, please. We're not here to play!"

Those crass voices came chasing after us. I knew Mafuyu was already close to her limit, as Chiaki was already helping her with her steps, so the reporters caught us in no time.

"You do know the London incident has become something quite serious, don't you? You disappeared from the music world without even holding a public conference. Please let us in on the details if possible."

What the heck is that!? Are they that insensitive? Why are they asking Mafuyu these questions? I could sense Mafuyu trembling with unease through her palm.

"Was it related to your father? Is it true you're on bad terms with him? Did that happen after your parents divorced?"

"We heard you went to look for your mother when you were performing in Germany. Is that true?"

Mafuyu's hand flinched. My arm was hit by a sudden shiver that stopped me in my tracks.

"Mafuyu!"

Yelled Chiaki sadly. Mafuyu was squatting down on the asphalt of the car park; her hand gripped the sleeve of my shirt tightly. The reporters caught up to us and surrounded us.

"I'll call the police if you guys don't stop!"

Chiaki's voice was trembling as well, but the reporters just looked at each other and shrugged. The fury hidden in my heart was burning. What the hell is wrong with these people? Why are they trampling on Mafuyu like this?

"We haven't even done anything to her! I told you already, we just want some answers from her."

"Eh, we won't take up much of your time. Why don't we head somewhere where you guys can relax, and we'll have our interview there. And oh, let's take some photos as well."

"You guys—"

As I was clenching my fists, Chiaki's arms appeared before my eyes.

"Nao, take Mafuyu and run! Hurry!"

"But—"

"Don't worry, just go!"

Chiaki moved like a black whirlwind—I saw her lower her body, but couldn't catch what she did after that. I wasn't sure if she had rammed them with her body, or sent them flying with a kick; I just knew that two reporters on opposite sides of me had collapsed due to some impact to their body.

"Uh...oh" "Wha....."

I picked Mafuyu up and carried her on my back as I started running. She felt much heavier than she did the last time I had carried her—probably because her limbs were overly stiff. I could

hear the angry howls of the reporters behind me, but I shook them off and scrambled up the stairs. We squeezed our bodies through a gap in the back door. I was really worried about Chiaki as well, but decided to leave that concern for later—first, I have to bring Mafuyu to the green room. Mafuyu was slumped over my back in a shattered state; and her breathing was rough and uneven, which made me feel really uneasy.

"Young man?"

I bumped into Senpai in the corridor in front of the storeroom. Looks like she's making her way back from the stage.

"What's going on—"

It was only when I pointed at the door that I realized my throat was parched. "Chiaki, she—" were the only words I barely managed to squeeze out of my mouth.

Senpai turned around right away and sprinted towards the back door. At the same time, Chiaki came stumbling into the building, and the two of them knocked into each other. Chiaki's headdress and dress were a mess.

"Are you alright, Comrade Aihara?" asked Senpai, as she helped support Chiaki's body.

"I-I'm alright. They didn't follow me here."

The four of us retreated to the green room. All of the large items had been moved to the stage already, so all that was left in the room were the guitars and the two synthesizers stacked on top of each other. I used one of the large props as a makeshift chair and set Mafuyu down on it. Her body was still trembling, and her lips were pale.

"Mafuyu, are you okay? Mafuyu!"

I called out to her right next to her ears. She responded with a nod, but her eyes were dazed—her reaction was so minute, it just looked like her chin was shaking because of her trembling.

"It looks like those guys were loitering around our café."

Said Chiaki in disdain.

"They approached us all of a sudden when we were crossing

through an empty area. They're disgusting."

"So what happened to them?"

"I ran away immediately after I kicked them, so I have no idea. They probably went into the seats for the audience."

Mafuyu's shoulders flinched in fear.

"Sorry, if only I had been more careful—"

It isn't Chiaki's fault. They're the ones who are at fault.

"..... I knew it."

I didn't realize Mafuyu was the one that had murmured those words. When I turned my head around, Mafuyu's body wasn't trembling much anymore, but she was still tightly grasping my wrists. Her eyes were fixed on a certain spot on the ground.

"Those guys knew about Mama."

Her voice sounded like a dead person's moan, which made me shudder. I knelt down beside her to look at her eyes, but she shut them tight to avoid eye contact with me.

"Why? I had forgotten about it already. I had already decided to forget about it....."

Mafuyu's empty words landed drip by drip onto the folds of her black skirt.

"I was really composed the day I met Mama. I even thought to myself, 'Oh, I never expected to be this composed. I must be a really cold person'. B-But....."

Just then—

The announcement coming from the school's broadcast sounded especially loud—"Three-thirty, Folk Music Research Club <feketerigó> will be holding their very first live concert at school in the sports complex." The announcement acted like a catalyst of some sort—I could hear the cheers and the footsteps of the audience even though a wall separated us and them.

It had already begun. I could feel the rumbling of the sports complex. Mafuyu gripped my wrists even harder, which made me realize something.

"I was not composed at all. When I was about to go on stage the second day..... I heard it..... the sound of applause—"

Mafuyu should've been holding my wrist tightly with her right hand, but her grasp was weak. Why? Because only Mafuyu's thumb and index finger were wrapped around my wrist—her middle, fourth and baby fingers were slumped weakly to the side.

"Mafuyu! Your fingers—"

Mafuyu shook her head hard, as though she wanted to tear her head from her body.

"It is okay, it is alright now. I am fine."

"How are you fine!? Just now—"

Senpai and Chiaki realized as well. Senpai bit her lip and leaned her body against the wall, while Chiaki quickly ran over to Mafuyu and grasped Mafuyu's knees.

"Mafuyu, a-are you okay? Do you want to go to the infirmary?"

"I am fine. It's okay, I will be alright after a rest."

The fingers on Mafuyu's right hand were twitching strangely. Fine? You're like this and you say you're fine?

"Now's not the time to be worrying about the concert. Let's get a doctor here."

Senpai said that in a calm voice. but immediately after, Mafuyu grabbed my shoulder tightly and stood up while wobbling.

"Don't call the doctors!"

"Objection overruled. We have to fix your body....."

"I will think of something! Please, I am really okay. Please do not cancel the concert."

"Why are you so insistent on this—"

I had never seen Senpai so speechless, but I was thinking the exact same thing. Why is she so insistent on this?

"I-I want to stay here, I want to stay in this band! So please!"

"You shouldn't force yourself even if that's the case!"

Chiaki grabbed Mafuyu by the shoulders and gave her a hard

shake. The noise and footsteps of the audience were getting louder and louder. How much time do we have before the concert starts? There's no way we can continue on with the concert, right? Since Mafuyu's already in such a state—

"This is something made possible by everyone's efforts. I do not want everything to be wrecked just because of me."

"I have no interest whatsoever in hearing you talk about your willpower."

Senpai cut Mafuyu's unnecessary speech off with her incredibly cold words.

"Ten minutes. I'm canceling the concert if your fingers aren't fixed in that time."

After saying that, Senpai grabbed her guitar and left. Her back looked really gloomy.

"It'd be pointless for us to perform if we're down a member. I'll check the stage and be back in a jiffy."

Looking past Chiaki's shoulders, I watched Senpai's back become swallowed up by the closing door.

"Mafuyu, is there anything..... I..... I can do to help?"

Mafuyu shook her head and released my hand. She could barely stand up with the help of the synthesizers next to her.

"Wait for me at the stage..... I will think of something myself."

Chiaki looked at me, and then at Mafuyu. She wanted to say something, but decided against it in the end. Instead, she just lowered her head and bit her lip in frustration. Not long after, though, she raised her head again and pressed her fists into my chest.

Please think of something—somehow, through her fists, Chiaki had conveyed to me the words she couldn't say out loud. She then left the room without looking back even once.

"Naomi, you too....."

Said Mafuyu, as she rested her hands on the control board of the synthesizer.

"Go. I am okay, I will—"

"How can you recover in your current state?"

Mafuyu lifted her head in shock. Even I was surprised by how cold my voice sounded. Her eyes were close to tearing.

"What on earth are you thinking? Why do you insist on doing this? Are you an idiot? You should know very well the condition of your body!"

But I couldn't help but think, "What the heck is going on with me as well? Why am I so angry?" It was because I knew I couldn't do anything for her. Mafuyu had stood up by herself, for some reason unknown to me, but now, was collapsed before me in a place I couldn't reach. This is just..... pathetic.

But I couldn't stop myself. I continued,

"It's okay for you to not play the piano right now. We won't disband because of something like that, and yet, you're forcing yourself to play the piano in front of everyone—"

"You—"

Mafuyu cut me off as she cried.

"You are the one that told me—you wanted me to play the piano for you on stage. But, but I could not do it then, so I was disappointed in myself."

I..... said that? I asked her to play the piano for me?

The air in my throat solidified into a lump. That's right, I did say that—back when the two of us were alone in the music resource room. That time when we performed <Ave verum corpus>—when I heard that miraculous piano accompaniment that blended the singing and the conducting together. Back then, I did tell her I hoped to hear her piano in an actual performance and not just during practice. But I never thought—

"But I still wished to play the piano for you. I had actually planned to live in a world far away from the piano if you had never asked me to play, but....."

Everything was for..... me.

"But, my fingers..... gradually became able to move."

Mafuyu continued on in her depressed voice.



"It happened after the chorus contest. It was all because of you."

My throat was trembling slightly. I couldn't speak. Her fingers healed not because she met Yuri, but..... because of me? Mafuyu picked up the piano again because I asked her "Please play the piano for me"—how can that be?

"It is okay to force myself because you are here. For now, no matter what, I will—"

Mafuyu gripped the keyboard tightly and stood up with difficulty. Her frail arm—that she would use to play the piano once more, for my sake, even if it meant doing so beneath the cruel lights—was trembling nonstop. It hurt me to see her like that.

Why me?

I wished to stay by Mafuyu's side forever; and I hoped to give her strength whenever she was in pain. But half of the reason why Mafuyu's in pain right now is because of me, and the other half is because of herself. If what she said is really true, what should I do at a time like this?

"But you have never once responded to me. You had said, many times, that you wanted to listen to me play the piano, and because of that, I tried to get you to listen. I had even recorded all of Beethoven so you could listen to my piano. I wanted to tell you that my fingers were all healed, and that everything should be fine now. But I never knew..... I was so..... weak. That I would become like this just because—"

The fingernails on Mafuyu's left hand were digging deep into her right hand when she said all that. Her fingertips were even turning pale as a result of her tight grip.

"..... Mafuyu," I did my best to squeeze my voice out from my parched throat. "Calm down."

That was the only thing I could say—a line I thought was totally stupid and corny.

"Why are you doing so much for someone like me?"

No wait, that isn't what I wanted to say.

"—Sorry, I never noticed."

That Mafuyu had already picked up everything again.

"I never noticed myself either."

With her wet eyelashes lowered slightly, Mafuyu continued on with that hoarse voice of hers,

"I never thought I would want to play the piano for someone."

I had already lost everything—Mafuyu murmured. Her words fell onto the scarred black cover of the synthesizer.

"I do not know anymore. I have no idea what I should do. I do not know where I should return to. I have never played the piano for someone else's sake."

"How can that be"—was what I wanted to say, but I swallowed my words.

Back when we had run away from home together, Mafuyu told me that her last memory of her loving the piano was of a time when she was together with her mother. That unfillable hole caused Mafuyu to become immobile due to her fears. And it was those damned reporters that brought back memories of a time that she would never be able to return to.

Mafuyu reached towards the casing of the synthesizer with her fingers. Her face was filled with tears when she turned around to face me.

"..... Go. Kyouko and Chiaki are waiting for you."

Mafuyu's voice sounded like the cracking of ice.

"I..... I will come up with something..... But if I do not make it in time, then just go on without me. The rest of the songs can be performed with just three—"

I raised my fists and slammed them down on the synthesizer to interrupt Mafuyu. I couldn't listen to her any longer. Her long maroon hair trembled slightly; and her blue eyes, filled with unease, looked up at me in fear.

"I don't want that."

My voice was cold but crystal clear.

"I definitely won't walk out of this room and leave you alone in

here."

"Why? B-But I may never be able to play the piano again."

"No—it has nothing to do with the piano or the band."

I stared straight into Mafuyu's eyes, which looked as though they were about to sink into the bed of the ocean, and said,

"I've already decided to stay by Mafuyu's side forever."

We used to be connected only by music.

If that's true, what would happen if someone became unable to sing or couldn't continue playing? The only thing we could do then, is stay rooted to the spot. I don't want to carry on like that.

It was because I loved Mafuyu. I wanted to stay by her side even if we lost our music.

Those feelings of mine turned into bubbles and vanished on the surface of the ocean between us. Mafuyu's pale face was dyed with a faint dash of redness. She lowered her head in an attempt to hide her embarrassment.

"But, even if you have decided to stay here....."

I can't do anything for you even if I'm by your side? Is that really the case?

"I have never once played a melody for you successfully. What should I do? I have no idea."

What should I do? What must I do to help Mafuyu pick up the piano once more?

I won't be able to help her if I'm only standing by her side. I couldn't speak. All I could do was stand there, frozen in a daze. My hands wouldn't come into contact with where she needed my help—

Just then, that melody, the darkness, the howling of the wind, and the smell of the raindrops appeared in my mind once more.

It had.....

It had happened before.

"..... You did."

"..... Eh?"

"Mafuyu did play the piano for me before."

Her blue eyes trembled slightly in confusion, as if they were melting. She shut her eyes.

Has Mafuyu really forgotten about it already?

I could still recall that miracle very clearly. I shot a glance at my bass, which was resting on its stand to the side. That fragment of my body was still around precisely because Mafuyu had played the piano for me.

Perhaps it was just an auditory hallucination. Or just magic, constructed by the howls of the sea, the echoes and the thick mist. But what I heard was certainly the sound of Mafuyu's piano.

If that's true, then what should I do? How can I get Mafuyu to remember?

I can do it.

Before I realized, I had already opened my tightly shut eyes. The world before me was enclosed by the dirty concrete walls of the dark storeroom. Me, Mafuyu, my bass and the synthesizer were leaning tightly against each other under the gaze of the junk by the side of the walls.

Can I really do it? Can I summon her memories?

I have no idea, but the only thing I can do is try.

"—Mafuyu."

Her head was still lowered when I called out to her.

"Mafuyu, step back. I want to make some preparations."

She lifted her head when she heard my words. Her eyes were still swollen from crying.

"..... Why?"

I silently pulled Mafuyu away from the synthesizer, then knelt down to stuff a stack of scores beneath one of the legs. The angle of tilt should've been something close to this.

Next, I scanned the room and pushed the fridge down on its side and moved it next to the synthesizer. I then leaned the upside-down bicycle against the door, and dumped the cupboard and desk clock

onto the floor. Finally, I moved the drawers in front of the keyboard.

"Take a seat."

Mafuyu stared intently at me with her teary eyes.

"What are you doing, Naomi?"

"Don't ask. Just take a seat."

I pushed Mafuyu's back to get her to sit on the drawers, then stood behind her and flipped the switch of the synthesizer. Can I really do it? For a brief moment, I thought what I was attempting to do was incredibly ridiculous.

But—

If that really is a special place.

If that really is Mafuyu's greatest wish—

"Close your eyes."

I murmured.

I stretched my arms over Mafuyu's shoulders to reach the keyboard, then fumbled around with the control board to locate the switch for the sound effects.

It started off with the sound of the raindrops.

The gentle drops of rain that landed on the buckets full of holes, the roofs of the scrapped cars, and the broken cupboards.

That sound became overlapped with the faint roars of the waves of the sea.

The sounds of the waves that passed by the endless trees.

The rustling of the leaves of the forest.

The howl of the wind as it breezed past the mountains.

The sound of the passing train in the distance.

The sound effects that were hidden in the machine were appearing before the darkness of my eyelids, one after another, and were passing through my hands, spreading endlessly outwards. We couldn't hear the commotion of the audience; only silence, formed by the stoppage of time, surrounded us.

<The Department Store of Hearts' Desires>.

It was the junkyard where we had first met; the same place where we had found what we had lost. But at the same time, it was also a place located at the ends of the world, where the remnants of dreams accumulated.

That was my long-standing wish. I had made a wish back then; I wished I could listen to Mafuyu's piano once more. And in that moment, Mafuyu had responded to that wish, and I heard the fugue that night. The miraculous power that allowed me to find my bass was Book 1 of Bach's <The Well-Tempered Clavier>.

As I was praying, I switched on the other synthesizer. The lights on the control board lit up, and an influx of white noise appeared amid the rustling of the forest.

Unknown to me, Mafuyu was already staring at me with her head lifted. There were still remnants of tears on her upside-down face. Both of us had opened our eyes, but the magic had yet to cease. We were still located at the ends of the world, where the miraculous department store was.

"Do you remember now?"

Mafuyu gently nodded her head.

"If so....."

I chose my words carefully in my head, and spoke each and every word out slowly. I had to say it before the magic disappeared.

"I hope you will continue to play the piano. I wish to listen to Mafuyu play."

"..... But I have no idea what I should play."

Said Mafuyu, as she rested the back of her head on my chest. Her eyes were like that of a nestling that had lost its way after separating from the flock.

"..... You decide, Naomi."

But I also had no idea what she should've played. Bach's fugue had just ended in my mind, and dawn would be approaching soon.

I allowed the LCD screen of the control board to guide my fingers as I sought out the answer on the keyboard.

Then came the final sound effect.

A screech called out to Mafuyu. And the fluttering of a pair of wings could be heard amongst the trees as the bird prepared itself for its flight into the dawn. Mafuyu's hand struck the keyboard once, releasing the cold sound of the piano.

Perhaps it was due to the constant striking of the G note, but it felt like our heartbeats were inseparably overlapped. Mafuyu counted the remaining traces of the tiny ripples on the black-and-white keys with her fingers—the fingers of both her hands—while attached to the gradually weakening rain.

<Blackbird>—

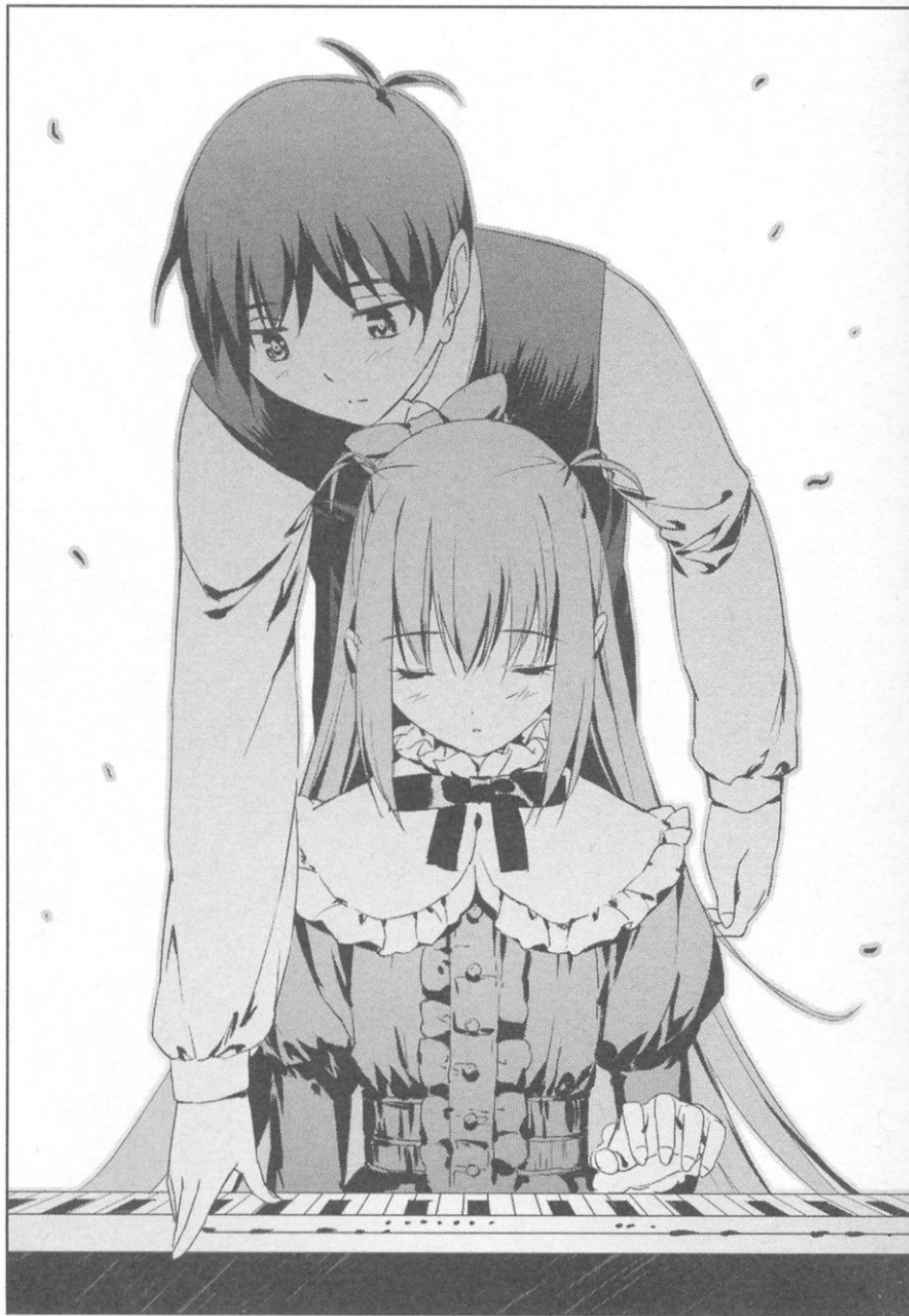
The misty veil was shred into pieces.

The light of dawn.

The song that was about to break free from my mouth disappeared at the edge of my lips.

This whole time, this song has always existed between us.

And until the magic subsides, the only thing I want to hear is the sound of the piano.



A while later, the final note finally disappeared after dispersing itself on the surface of the water. The blackbird had thrust itself off the branch to soar into the sky. The rain stopped; and the wind died



down. We were getting further and further away from the ocean.

The back of Mafuyu's head was still firmly pressed against my chest.

We had returned—to the center of the messy storeroom, where the synthesizers were impatiently giving off an unstable rumble. I could faintly hear the chatter and the footsteps of the audience through the walls.

We've returned.

For a while, I didn't know what to say. Mafuyu was staring at her hands in silence, and was clenching them and opening them to reaffirm the dampness of the rain that had just been surrounding them.

"..... Mafuyu?"

I gently called out her name.

Mafuyu didn't turn around. Instead, she removed her hands from the keyboard and placed them on my arm, then gripped my wrist hard with all five fingers of her right hand. I couldn't believe it. I felt a sense of elation surge inside me, but what had come before that was a much stronger throb. But I couldn't move my hands away just yet.

She may not be fully recovered, but Mafuyu has returned back to this place.

Thank goodness. I could barely speak out my thoughts with my hoarse murmurs.

"..... T-Thank... you....."

Mafuyu replied in stutters.

"Mmm."

It felt like I should've said something, but that was a way too difficult task for me. I couldn't really come up with something quick to say.

"..... Or perhaps..... I should get you to play something for me?"

Since it was really rare for Mafuyu to ask me for a song request. Darn, I should've asked her to play the [\*\*<Diabelli Variations>\*\*](#), since

it's not on any of her CDs.....

"Idiot!"

She scratched my wrist with her fingernails..... It hurt quite a bit.

She stood up and turned around while still in-between my arms. Our faces were almost touching when she raised her head to look at me.

"If it is Naomi..... you can ask me..... anytime."

Mafuyu's face turned beet red halfway through her sentence. She even pushed my chest with both her hands, almost causing me to fall backwards.

"A-Anytime..... so that means—" Why did she phrase it that way? Because it's me? It was only then that I realized that I had said something really incredible to her. I said I'd be by her side forever..... and she definitely heard me. So that means..... Mafuyu, she..... no, but, it can't be, right?

"I-I already said I will play!"

Mafuyu pushed my chest with both her hands again.

"You are the one that brought me back here! Didn't you say you wanted to listen to my piano? Why are you acting as if you do not know anything?"

"S-Sorry....."

"Idiot! Dummy!"

Mafuyu pushed me aside and turned to face the synthesizer. She switched it off to prepare it for moving.

"A person like you should just stay dense forever! All you need to do is flip the scores and play the bass! Now help me with the other side, we will be moving it onstage!"

"Ah, m-mmm."

After slinging the straps of the bass around my shoulder, I quickly walked to the other side of the synthesizer. Mafuyu turned her burning face away unhappily.

"..... Can I?"

I tried asking.

"Can you what?"

Asked Mafuyu softly, as she lifted the synthesizer.

"Can I play the bass for you and help you flip your scores forever?"

That was the only thing I could think up after racking my brains out. Because I loved Mafuyu—and I wanted to tell her that several times, but I couldn't bring myself to say it.

"You are my bassist, are you not?"

That was Mafuyu's reply.

I see. I heaved a sigh of relief in my heart.

For now, the only thing connecting us together is music. The tears on Mafuyu's face had disappeared completely, and she had returned to her normal self with her stinging words.

That made me feel a lot more at ease—I'm really useless.

When Mafuyu pushed open the door, a thunderous mix of cheers and footsteps greeted us.

Leaning against the wall of the corridor was a girl in a frilly black goth lolita dress..... Chiaki. She tightened her grip on her two drumsticks and slowly lifted her head.

She flashed me an icy stare, then directed her attention to Mafuyu.

The three of us didn't speak for a while. The noise of the audience, seeping through the walls, sounded like nothing more than just the breeze of an oncoming wind. Chiaki stepped away from the wall. And as she did that, I lifted the synthesizer off Mafuyu's hands to carry it myself.

Chiaki moved towards us one step at a time, then clamped her hands around Mafuyu's right arm. Confused, Mafuyu looked at her arm, and then at Chiaki.

"..... It's because Mafuyu always disappears all of a sudden."

Mumbled Chiaki, as she slumped her shoulders. It looked like she was close to tears.

"And Nao's the only one that knows where you are. Always."

"..... S-Sorry."

"I do hope you realize how frustrated I am."

Mafuyu nodded. Chiaki pressed her forehead against Mafuyu's.

"Nao, you can't spoil Mafuyu like that. She can move her hands now, right? Let her carry her own instrument."

"Eh..... Oh, m-mmm."

I gently passed the heavy synthesizer to Mafuyu. Can she even carry it? I couldn't help but worry when I saw those delicate arms of hers.

"And also, come here."

"Eh? W-What?"

Chiaki grabbed my ear and pulled me away from the stage. My mind went blank for a brief moment when I saw the person squatting against the wall next to the door.

"..... T-Tetsurou?"

Grey jersey, messy hair, and a bruise near his eye—that guy's none other than Tetsurou! But I tried to convince myself otherwise, that he was nothing more than just an illusion. No wait..... why's Tetsurou here backstage?

"Oh? Ohhhh!? You're finally out? Hey brat, you can't have your customers waiting, yeah? Look, everyone's getting impatient already, so get going!"

"W-Wh....." My voice was stuck. "Why are you here?"

"I said I'd pay you a visit, didn't I? Can't a father attend the school festival his son is participating in?"

Tetsurou shrugged nonchalantly.

"T-Tetsurou, could it be that you....."

Is he here to write articles about Mafuyu—

I then noticed a few straps hanging from his hands, and connected to them, were cameras—four of them, all expensive looking and equipped with giant lenses.

"..... W-What are those for?"

"Hmm? Ah—well....." Tetsurou scratched his head. "You see, I

saw four familiar faces at the entrance. They're the parasites of the industry and they pissed me off, so I gave them a good beating and confiscated their cameras."

So that's the reason behind that bruise next to his eye? Please don't fight in your son's school.....

"S-So what happened to them?"

"Nothing much. Probably cried their way home?"

I was at a loss for words. So what was his reason for loitering around our class and asking stuff about Mafuyu?

"Don't you underestimate the industry's ruffian! I'll be heading off then~"

With that, Tetsurou waved his hand and opened the back door. He's planning to leave just like that? Didn't he say he was here to watch?

"I'm here to see the goth lolita! Who gives a shit about that horrible bass of yours? Now now, get going, everyone's waiting for you!"

He then heartlessly shut the door, just like that.

I couldn't help but wonder—

Did he know Mafuyu was being targeted by those reporters? So he actually came down here just to stop them—so he could protect Mafuyu.

Tetsurou actually took the initiative to protect her? That totally useless guy actually did something like that? That's quite a silly deduction..... but.....

"Nao, hurry up!"

I was pulled back to reality when Chiaki tugged my sleeves. I saw Mafuyu, hugging the synthesizer that was about as tall as her, slowly walking down the corridor with unsteady steps. Chiaki pulled me—with my bass on my back—by the arm and caught up to Mafuyu.

And before us—

In the midst of the light coming at us from all angles, there was a silhouette of a person standing amongst the cheers, teasing the audience with her long hair and the hem of her skirt. I couldn't quite

make out the expression on her face, as we were staring into the lights, but I was absolutely certain of the sort of smile Kagurazaka-senpai was wearing at a time like that.

Everyone's..... waiting for us.

I caught up to Mafuyu and briefly exchanged a glance with her. We nodded in unison. It's alright, everyone's here.

Then—let's go!

Chiaki let go of my arm to walk a step or two ahead of me.

As for me, I chased her, and made my way down the promenade stretching towards the light.

# Credits

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